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Come Rain or Come Shine

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COME RAIN OR COME SHINE

by

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B.S. June 1977, Ohio State University

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Approved by:

Tina Peery (Director)

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ABSTRACT

COME RAIN OR COME SHINE

Teresa E. (Terry) Perrel
Old Dominion University, 1994
Director: Janet Peery

This novella, set in 1946, explores the needs and wants of Cooley and Edna Godwin, who have been married almost twenty years. The title comes from a popular song of the time about the constancy of love. The story opens and closes with both the husband's and wife's perspectives, but the central body of the work takes on Edna's consciousness as she leaves home, South Norfolk, Virginia, to look for happiness in California. During her travels, she is forced to examine her prejudices, to question her myopic view of the world, and to recognize the nature of true love.

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Chapter 1. Edna

Edna had had it with Cooley.

Her stomach churned as she recalled how she was startled out of a dream -- President Truman had just awarded her a blue ribbon for baking -- by a choking feeling. Her first thought was that a killer had broken into her house, but then, as she squirmed and struggled for air, Edna had realized it was Cooley hunched over her, grunting, his belly flopping back and forth in her face.

She shuddered. It wasn't the first time her husband had acted crazy. The first year they were married he asked her to wear red high heels and an apron to bed. Then there was the time that she was relaxing in a hot bath after a day of canning when Cooley strutted in naked as a jay bird and tried to join her. And just last year, in the middle of a beautiful Sunday afternoon, he put a record on the player and asked her to take her clothes off piece by piece. Her husband had tried some crazy things in the past nineteen years, but this last business really took the cake. The man was a pervert, and she wondered, as she dusted the collection of tiny porcelain shoes that set on the shelves of her china cabinet, where he ever got such fool ideas. Probably down on Front Street.

Edna turned on the radio and made up her mind to not think about it anymore. She was going to cash in her war bonds hidden in the sleeve of her suitcase, pack up the Buick and move as far away from him as possible, even if it meant the other side of the United States. Her friend Florence, who traveled more than anyone in South Norfolk, had sent her picture postcards from San Diego two years before: pictures of a sunset over the ocean; pink and orange hibiscus in full bloom; a handsome sailor in crisp, clean blues saluting the American flag. It looked like a nice place to live, a good place to start over.

Edna hummed along as "Stormy Weather" played on the radio. She figured it would take less than a week to get everything in order. She would make sure all their clothes were washed up, the house was spic and span, there was nothing spoiled in the refrigerator. She didn't want anyone saying that she had taken off and left the place a pig sty. No one in South Norfolk would ever be able to say one word bad about the way she kept house. Long after she was gone, they would talk about how Edna Mae Godwin's kitchen floor was so clean that a man could eat off of it. She smiled. The idea of such talk comforted her. She filled the scrub bucket with ammonia and water, took the rag mop out of the closet, and set to washing the linoleum.

Edna loved the burning smell of ammonia and the way scuff marks and other smudges disappeared with a little elbow grease. When she was a teenager and giddy with the dream of one day keeping house for Earl Cooley Godwin, Edna viewed linoleum as a canvas and herself an artist as she dipped her mop into a bucket, then swirled and brushed its strings against the floor. But her method had changed with age. It became less artful, more full of purpose, and now, at 37, she pushed and pulled the mop with long, hard strokes that were broken by occasional stabs for stubborn patches, like specks of tar. If she had a nickel for every bit of tar that Cooley had tracked into the house from Front Street, she would be a very rich woman.

As Edna tried to calculate how very rich, she dropped to her hands and knees to scrape a clump of black with a table knife, careful to keep the goo from the tips of her fingernails. The very nature of tar was nasty, and its burnt smell made her stomach turn. It reminded her of when she lived with her mother and sister on Blue Mountain, the years before her family became respectable.

Edna took her time scraping. The speck of tar was the last spot in her house to clean before she went to visit her mother. She wiped the knife blade with a rag and returned to prying the last little bit from the linoleum, and as she dug and lifted, she tried to conjure her mother's response to the news of her leaving. She knew her mother would

ask why, and, for a moment, Edna considered lying. She knew that tracking in tar and having a big belly were not reasons enough to leave a good provider and move three thousand miles away, but the thought of telling the truth about Cooley's ways to anyone, especially her mother, made Edna sicker than the smell of tar did.

She straightened herself into a kneeling position, closed her eyes, and breathed deeply. Before pushing herself all the way up, she prayed for the words to tell her mother that she was leaving.

As Cooley surveyed the weedy plot behind the house, he realized that he enjoyed putting in his garden almost as much as eating its harvest. He was disappointed, however, with the late spring freeze that delayed his planting until now, the third week of May. He put his foot on the shovel and pushed it into the ground. Working the handle like a lever, he pushed down and pulled up until the soil loosened, turned the dirt and inhaled, holding in its damp smell. After turning a few more shovelfuls, he sat beside the broken ground and put both hands into the dirt to work apart the clods.

Everything Cooley knew about gardening he had learned from his Pawpaw, a produce farmer. The old man had also taught him how to smoke stogies, to frog-gig with a flashlight and homemade spear, to drink Dr. Pepper with salted peanuts, and to please himself with a woman. Now, after this latest incident which left Edna stomping around the house in silence and Cooley staying out of her way, he wondered about the soundness of his grandfather's advice. He wanted to ask Pawpaw what he had done wrong yesterday morning, but the old man had died of a heart attack nine months earlier while celebrating the Allies' victory over Japan at Widow Woods' house. That day, August 10, 1945, had been the saddest day of Cooley's life.

It hurt him to think that maybe his grandfather hadn't known everything, but he knew Pawpaw had been partially right about one thing. A few months before Cooley's marriage, the old man arched his brows and told him that Edna had too much starch in

her. But he predicted, with a slap to his grandson's knee, she would loosen up after awhile, after she set up housekeeping and had a baby or two. He winked. At the time, Cooley wasn't sure what his grandfather meant, but he knew, that despite the old man's playfulness, the words were a warning.

Now, a little more than nineteen years later, Cooley likened his wife to the heavily starched collars on his going-to-church shirts. Edna kept the house so clean and organized that she even arranged her spices and canned goods in alphabetical order, washed his clothes before he had hardly taken them off, and scrubbed the floors and walls so often that the house continually smelled of cleanser. Cooley appreciated his wife's need for tidiness, especially since he had a lacking in this area, but he felt that she had not tried often enough or hard enough to conceive a child. And in this matter, he had been more than glad to do his part.

Cooley shook dirt loose from the roots of a potato weed, a type of thistle which, if left to grow, would produce pale lilac flowers by July and choke everything in the garden. As he tossed the spiny plant aside, he thought of how women were like weeds: they might look pretty and sweet, but if you didn't handle them carefully, they would prick the crap out of you, maybe even take your life.

He recalled the look of fear, then hate in Edna's eyes the morning before, and he wondered if she had wanted to kill him dead on the spot. He hadn't meant her any harm, hadn't planned to make her mad. In fact, he hadn't really thought of anything that morning except how she had the prettiest lips of any woman he'd ever met.

He had awakened just past sun-up from a hard sleep and needed to pee, but the warmth of the sun spilling into the room and the slight breeze of the ceiling fan made him too lazy to rise. He cushioned his head against the headboard and listened to the familiar sounds around him: the squawks and chatter of birds pursuing and fleeing each other; the whirr of the fan; the harping of crickets; and the persistent puffs of his wife's snoring.

Cooley gathered the edges of the sheet to his chest and looked at his wife lying next to him. Silver clips held her ginger hair, and a hairnet tied tight at her forehead caused her skin to furrow. Except for these lines and a few patches of dried cold cream, her face was as pale and as smooth as it was the day he married her. He rolled onto his side and propped his arm under his head. Cooley noted that Edna's lips, bare of make-up, were the color of her nipples, not quite pink, not quite brown. With his finger, he traced the outline of her full bottom lip but pulled away when she started to stir. After she returned to a steady snore with her head back and mouth open, Cooley moved to her upper lip, letting his finger briefly rest at the dips in the corners and center. The curved line reminded him of the wavy birds his mother had taught him to draw when he was a child. Edna moved again, this time licking her lips, before her jaws slackened once more, leaving her mouth moist and open. She looked so beautiful, so serene, lying there that he couldn't stop himself from rising and kneeling over her, his legs straddling her chest.

The memory of that particular moment caused Cooley's heart to beat faster. As if to deafen the pounding that he felt and heard, he jumped up from the ground and began jabbing the soil with the shovel until he had chopped all the weeds from their roots.

Edna guided the Buick up the rock-speckled drive, careful to avoid soft spots and holes that might cause mud to splatter. Her mind strayed from what she had planned to say to her mother as to why her stepfather, Emmett, hadn't fixed up the driveway with a load or two of gravel. Even though her sister, Lucy, was still at home, money couldn't be that tight.

The Buick rocked to a stop in front of the porch, where her mother sat, swallowed by a rattan chair, doing needle work. Edna checked her face in the rear-view mirror, pressed her hair to her head, then slid from the seat of the car.

"Hi, Mama." She shook the skirt of her shirtwaist and reminded herself: just act natural. She tottered toward the porch, the heels of her pumps not quite touching ground.

"Hey, Sweetie." Her mother's thin lips stretched wide across her dentures. "I've been wondering where you've been. I told Emmett this morning it was time you showed up."

Edna started up the steps, staring at her feet, counting to herself, careful not to rush. Her legs felt queer, all weak and rubbery, as though they could hardly hold her up. As she reached the top step, Edna looked up to see her mother beaming. She noticed how crazy she looked with part of her upper lip caught on her dentures and her eyes magnified by her glasses into big, blue poker chips.

"So, where've you been hiding?" Her mother stuck the needle between her lips, held the navy fabric in front of her chest, and looked for puckers.

"You want some tea? I just made a pitcher."

Edna wasn't thirsty, but the idea of a cool glass between her sweaty palms, something to hold and fiddle with while she talked to her mother, sounded good.

"I'll get it, Mama. You want more?"

Edna went into the house. As the screen door shut behind her, her mother shouted, "Sweetie, I got some new glasses, but don't use them. I'm saving them for company. Get yourself a jar off the drying rack."

Except for some wear and tear from years of use, the kitchen had changed little since she had moved out. Canned goods lined the tops of the oak cabinets, a white enamel pot hung from a nail above the stove, and a ceramic house with leprechauns peeking out from its windows rested on the window sill above the sink. She took a jar from the rack and looked for smudges.

By the time she returned to the porch, her face cooled with a few pats of water, her mother had finished sewing. She knotted the thread as Edna settled onto the glider, then bent down to bite off the string. Edna stiffened at the snap. She remembered

learning in home economics class that biting thread could ruin your teeth. It could cause little ridges along the edges. Since then, Edna had always used scissors made special for sewing. Sometimes, she recalled with disgust, Cooley took them to trim the hairs from his nose. Her head began to buzz.

"Mama, I'm going to California."

Her mother peered over her glasses, which had slid past the bridge of her nose. "Why, Edna, how wonderful. When are y'all leaving?" Pushing her sewing aside, she leaned forward. The top of her apron billowed from her breast.

"Oh, probably Wednesday. Thursday at the latest." Edna took a deep breath. Drops of moisture slid from her jar onto the skirt of her shirtwaist, turning the coral into orange, the lavender into purple. She set the tea on the side table stained with water rings.

"Well, how long y'all planning on staying?" Her mother leaned back, stroked the arms of the chair.

Edna flinched at the pride in her mother's voice, then focused on a spider making its web between two porch rails. She wanted to take a broom and knock it to kingdom come, to bat the broom until every bit of its cotton-candy web was gone, but she couldn't. Her mother was waiting for an answer.

"Mama, I'm moving there for good. I'm leaving Cooley." She turned and watched her mother's eyes close, her head fall back. While Edna waited for her to speak, she heard the grinding of a tractor in the distance, and she thought that she'd rather throw herself in front of it than sit in silence on the porch. The quiet dragged on. Just as Edna felt as though she ought to say something, her mother straightened up and cracked her eyes into slits.

"No." Her mother pursed her lips.

"Yes, ma'am." Edna drew her shoulders back, her arms to her sides, ready for battle. "I know you think that Cooley is perfect, but he's got a dark side to him that you

don't know about." Her nails dug crescent moons into her flesh. " I just can't live with him anymore."

"Now, Edna," her mother looked down and smoothed the apron on her lap, "if this is about that Hawkins woman on Front Street, you've just got to let things be." She leaned forward, dropped her voice. "Cooley's just got more urges than most men, and that's his way of settling them." She paused and peered at her daughter. "Shoot, he's not the first man in town to have a woman on the side. You know that."

Edna blushed. She knew. His grandfather had done the same thing. Still, it hurt that Cooley wanted someone else, and it shamed her that the whole town knew it. For three years, she had known about Missy Hawkins -- Florence had told her -- but she had never spoken her name aloud. Not once. Not even to Cooley. Edna realized that she wanted to go home and leave some things unsaid, and she was starting to plan her escape when she saw the fly, its wings still fluttering, caught in the spider's web. She stayed, waiting to see what would happen, and she tied her fate to that of the fly.

"Mama, that's not it," she said quietly. "What's happened is between Cooley and me." Edna shook her head. "Believe me, I'm doing the right thing."

Her mother drew lines in the dew on the glass. "What could he have done to drive you all the way to California? I know he didn't try to kill you." She narrowed her eyes at Edna. "He's not even much on hunting. Sweetie, what is it?"

"Mama, I can't talk about it. I can't even say the words." Her eyes watered as she pictured Cooley's belly looming so big and white in her face, recalled the taste of salt in her mouth. She could hardly believe that her husband tried such a dirty trick. Edna leaned her head back and inhaled deeply, trying to calm the boiling inside of her. "Even thinking about it makes me sick to my stomach." Her stomach was knotting and unknotting the way it did when she drank too much ginger tea.

"Well, Edna, you're acting crazy. You can't just up and leave because of some little spat." Her mother leaned forward. "Are you having your monthly?"

Edna pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped beads of perspiration from her hairline, careful not to muss her foundation. As she tucked the cloth away, she turned to where the spider was wrapping two of its legs around the fly. "Mama, no."

"Then maybe you're pregnant. Queasy stomach. Touchiness. Are your breasts tender?"

Edna stared at her mother. She wondered how they had gone from talking about California to breasts, and the confusion made her light-headed, like when Cooley sneaked up and wrapped his arms so tight around her that she couldn't breathe. A trapped kind of feeling.

"Well, shoot, it's about time you had a baby." Her mother arched her eyebrows. "It's been nineteen years."

"Mama, I'm not pregnant." She hated the idea of having a baby, and from her first day of marriage she had taken measures against it by drinking ginger tea. "I'm just sick of Cooley and his ways." She looked at the web. For a moment, she thought the fly had escaped. Then she saw one veined wing wavering from behind the spider.

Edna set her Mason jar on the table. "I can't talk about this anymore. I've got to get home." As she stood and started down the steps, she felt her mother's eyes on her back. "I just wanted you to know that I was going to California," her hand rubbed the railing of the porch, powdering her palm with pollen, "and I'd appreciate it if you'd not tell the family and Florence until I'm gone." She stepped to the ground and stumbled, her heels turning on loose rocks, to the car. "I'll come by to see you before I leave."

As she grasped the door handle of the Buick, Edna heard her mother talking to herself, questioning what it would take to make her daughter happy. On the drive home, Edna asked herself that same question.

Chapter 2. Edna and Cooley

It was almost closing time at Godwin's Hardware and Appliance. Business had been brisk during the morning when carpenters and plumbers came in for supplies. But the afternoon, like most during the weekdays, had been quiet except for the occasional customer moseying in to buy seeds or fertilizer. Cooley used the time to restock shelves and to make sure things were where they belonged.

Orderliness was not one of his strong points, but he would rather try hard to keep everything in its rightful place, as irritating and frustrating as that was, than to face an angry customer. Once a man drove five miles to buy one screw from Godwin's Hardware and Appliance. He returned the next day, mad that the screw didn't fit his toaster. The man claimed that either the bin was marked wrong or the screws were all mixed up. Cooley knew it was the latter, and he felt so bad that he gave him a brand new toaster. Now the man was a regular customer. A happy one, too.

Cooley ran his fingers through the bin of quarter-inch screws, making sure they were all the same. Sometimes he pretended that each bin was a camp for the Allies and that the wrong size screws were spies trying to infiltrate the troops. Whenever he sighted a spy, he nabbed it and sent it to a nearby POW camp, marked with fractions.

The bell clanking against the glass door halted his sweep through the troops, and he stopped long enough to see his mother-in-law at the front of the store, bouncing on her tip-toes, straining her neck above the aisles to look for him.

"Mother Rountree." Cooley waved an arm toward Edna's mother. "Over here." He combed through the nails one more time while his mother-in-law wound her way down the aisles. As she cornered the fertilizer display, he inhaled, ready to meet her hug. The first time they met -- he was still in high school -- Vera Rountree hugged him so

tight that she had left him breathless, and from then on, he sucked in all the air he could before bending into her outstretched arms.

"Son, I can only stay a minute. Looks like rain, and Emmett's outside in the car, waiting on me." Vera tinkered with the brooch at her breast with one hand and gripped the handle of her handbag with the other. "You know that I'm not one to put my nose in someone else's business."

Cooley nodded.

"Edna was over at the house this afternoon. Says she's going to California. Wednesday."

Cooley ran his fingers through his hair. His hair, although thick, had turned white soon after he married, and he had wondered, more than once, if it was Edna's fault. As his hand made its way to the nape of his neck, it detected a tiny flip caused by a cowlick. Time for a trim. Maybe he would take the scissors from the cash register and just snip the curl off later. As he slid his hand from his hair, he noticed it trembled slightly.

"She's kind of mad right now." In order to steady his shaking, he hooked his fingers through the belt loops of his work pants. He studied the numbers on the bin marked "1/16." "Who's she going with? Florence?"

"Son, she's going by herself and not coming back. Edna says she's leaving you."

His heart quickened. Cooley felt Vera's eyes searching his face for answers as her fingers fiddled with the stitching on the handle of her handbag. He blushed, uncomfortable under her scrutiny, and wondered what, exactly, Edna had told her mother.

The more Cooley thought about Edna, her latest fit, and the predicament she had put him in with her mother, the madder he got. After Vera left, he hung up the closed sign on the front door, turned off the lights, and locked up the store. Edna, although

silent, still cooked, and he knew supper would be on the table in an hour. He was hungry, but this evening it would have to wait; he needed time alone to cool off. He jumped in his truck and headed to the house his Pawpaw had left him. For two hours, he sat slumped against the steps of its porch, sipping one Dr. Pepper after another. He watched the rain fall, felt the thunder shake the earth, and wondered why Edna had to make life so mixed up.

When Cooley woke up alone on Tuesday morning, he was fuzzy-headed, and as he raised himself up on his elbows in the still-dark room, the bed squeaked an unfamiliar sound. There was no window to shed light on where he was, and it took a few moments for Cooley to get his bearings, to realize that he was in the guest room.

He flopped back on the bed and recalled yesterday's conversation with Vera and his trip to Pawpaw's. He had decided last night that Edna was just blowing smoke, that she would no sooner go to California than a man would go to the moon, and he felt a bit disappointed. He had wondered what it would be like to come and go as he pleased without silent rebukes, to dry his hands on the guest towels in the downstairs bathroom, to put his feet on the coffee table, and to smoke cigars in the house. They were happy thoughts. For a few moments. But Edna had never made good on her threats. If she had, she would have been living at her mother's for the past few years, so Cooley had let his dreams of happiness float away.

When he had cooled off a bit, he admitted to himself that Edna had probably not told anyone other than her mother about their latest spat. He had to give credit where it was due. Edna wasn't a gossip. She might listen to every tale Florence Maynard carried, but she didn't spread them any farther.

Edna did, however, tend to put her own special slant on their troubles. Sometimes he thought she liked to look put upon. And that's what Cooley worried about -- how she had presented what he had tried to do the other morning to her mother. He

had no doubt that he had ended up looking like a heel by the time the tale was told. It hurt Cooley that someone, especially Vera, might think badly of him.

Cooley rolled out of bed. He knew the soil was soft from the rain, and if he got moving, he would have time to set out his tomato plants and Edna's herbs before getting ready for work. He pulled worn khaki pants over his boxer shorts, then padded down the stairs in his socks to look for his work boots.

Edna had heard Cooley come in the night before. He had made such a commotion coming in the back door that she wondered if he had been drinking. Granted, Cooley wasn't one for liquor, but who knew what trouble he might get into hanging around Front Street with all of its dives and juke bars. Florence had once told her of a Pentecostal preacher who had never touched a drop until he took his ministry to the streets in downtown Norfolk. After that, he became a regular booze hound. His wife and children left him, and he ended up living in a flop house with a woman named Lil. If such a thing could happen to one of God's chosen, it could certainly happen to Cooley. Edna had lain in bed, waiting for him to finish his dinner. Although she dreaded the thought of him lying next to her, all hot and sweaty, she was curious to see if Cooley stank of alcohol. But she never got a chance to sniff him. He hadn't crawled into their bed that night.

When Edna awoke the next morning, she was tired. Too many dreams -- or maybe they were nightmares -- had visited her during her sleep. She vaguely remembered running for her life as a black blob chased her through long, narrow halls. Then, somehow -- Edna recalled this part more clearly -- she ended up in the kitchen where Cooley sat, naked as a jaybird, smoking a cigar and leering at her. He had two baked potatoes with sour cream and chives where his privates were supposed to be.

Through the sheers that covered the window, she could see her husband working in the garden, and, for one empty moment, she felt that she was watching a stranger whose name she happened to know.

As Edna forked the last piece of fatback from the skillet, Cooley came in the back door. He splashed water on his face and scrubbed his hands in the basin while she cracked eggs into sputtering grease. By the time Cooley sat down at the table, she was scooping the fried eggs, sunny-side-up without any broken yolks, onto a platter.

Edna joined him at the table, her clasped hands resting on top of the yellow laminate, her head bowed. She waited for her husband to say the blessing. For the first few years of their marriage, she had chastised him that his "Praise-the-Lord-bless-the-cook-Amen" was not heartfelt, that he rambled it off like a child singing a nursery rhyme, but she finally gave up on trying to get him to change. Now, whenever Cooley gave the blessing, she said her own -- a fancy one that she had learned as a teenager -- silently.

Except for the sounds of forks clanking against dishes and chewing, breakfast was quiet. Cooley concentrated on the food that covered his plate. He broke open his biscuit and sandwiched a piece of fatback between its halves. He chopped his eggs and swirled grits with butter into the slivers of peppered whites and runny yellow. With a biscuit in one hand and a fork in the other, Cooley ate, without pausing for sips of juice or coffee, until his plate was clean. Then, he returned for seconds.

Edna picked at her egg and slice of cantaloupe. She cut strips of white from the egg until only its yellow bubble remained intact. She ate one small bite at a time, chewing slowly as she looked around the kitchen. A potted African violet sat on the window sill above the sink. A crystal prism, one of many chandelier teardrops that Florence had bought from an estate auction in North Carolina, dangled by a string from the window sash, spraying a rainbow onto the electric refrigerator. Edna loved her

refrigerator and matching white stove that Cooley had installed on New Year's Day. When her friends had dropped by the following week to view the latest in home appliances, Edna felt a pride that bordered on sin. Now, the thought of leaving her kitchen made Edna feel sad. Her heart ached at the thought of giving up such nice things, and, she wondered as she sipped her tea, if she really could.

Edna cut her cantaloupe into chunks, then speared a melon square as Cooley sponged his plate clean with a biscuit.

"Edna."

Edna looked up. She could see the white dough in his mouth as he chewed, and she waited for him to swallow, to say more.

"I hear tell that you're going to California."

Edna froze. She couldn't believe her mother had betrayed her. Edna placed her fork by the pieces of cantaloupe and focused on the yolk still whole on her plate.

As her heart pounded, Edna worked on maintaining her composure by clasping her trembling hands. "That's right, Cooley. I am." She held her breath and she watched him wipe his plate one more time. She waited for him to speak, to ask why she was going clear across the country. She waited for him to beg her to stay, to promise never to bother her with his filthy ways again.

Cooley looked at her and smiled.

"Well, that's just fine. You have a good trip, you hear?" He popped the last of the biscuit into his mouth and continued smiling. His jaws moved up and down and side to side as he finished the last of his breakfast. Edna stared.

After Cooley eased his chair from the table and stood up, he complimented her on the food that she had fixed. Edna wondered what he was up to. Determined not to let him see her rattled, she stayed put. When the water pipes from Cooley's shower stopped their squealing, she was still sitting there, her hands cradling her cup of ginger tea .

The burst of cold water made Cooley yelp and his privates shrivel, but its shock did nothing to lessen his good spirits. He laughed aloud as he imagined his wife fuming downstairs, cleaning like a banshee. For more than a decade, Edna had threatened, and he had cajoled. Enough was enough. This time, Cooley was calling her bluff. He took the soapy washcloth and scrubbed under his arms with gusto.

He was whistling and drying himself with a towel when he heard three raps on the bathroom door. Before he had time to answer, he heard his wife yell, "Earl Cooley Godwin, I'll be gone tomorrow."

Cooley grinned as he looked in the vanity mirror. He combed his hair and wondered how Edna was going to get out of the mess that she had caused this time. He decided he would take tomorrow off and see.

The next morning, Edna sensed something was fishy. It was after nine o'clock, and Cooley still hadn't left for work.

Breakfast had been kind of funny, too. Although they hadn't exchanged more than a dozen words after the blessing, Cooley kept smiling sweetly at Edna and chewed with his mouth shut. Again, as he had the day before, he complimented her cooking, saying the fried apples were the best he had ever eaten. Then he upped and left the table, heading for the porch rather than the bathroom. For two hours, he had been out there, smoking and reading the paper like he had all the time in the world while Edna cleaned the kitchen and dusted the house one last time. As she wiped the tiny porcelain slippers and shoes in her china cabinet, it dawned on Edna that Cooley had missed work so he could beg her to stay and that he was still working up the gumption to do it. Her husband had better get cracking. In less than an hour, after a little more dusting and a bath, she would be ready to leave.

Edna thought the day called for something festive. After her bath, she dabbed on Evening in Paris perfume, carefully applied a bit of Barely Pink lipstick, and put on her

cabbage rose dress that she saved for weddings. She topped off her outfit with her best spring hat, white straw with a sprig of violets. She looked good, so good that she was sure that Cooley would be sorry he had ever crossed her.

With suitcases in each hand and a Texaco map under her arm, Edna pushed open the front screen door, then let it slam behind her. She could sense Cooley sitting on the porch swing to her right, looking at her. She could smell the sweet stench of his cigar.

She stomped across the porch, down the steps to the open doors of the Buick, without glancing sideways. With the last piece of her luggage swung onto the back seat, she thrust the door shut with her hips. Then, she took off her hat and slid onto the front seat. As she unrolled her window, Edna more than half expected Cooley to get up off his duff and stop her or, at least, stay put and yell. But he didn't. He just kept swinging, his feet dragging the boards of the porch, and puffing on his cigar as though he hadn't a care in the world.

Edna pumped the gas pedal three times, then turned the key. She revved the engine while her fingers coiled around the steering wheel. She stared at the profile of her husband -- the glare on the windshield made a halo around him -- and she wondered what she had ever seen in Cooley. She hadn't the faintest idea. All Edna knew as she sat there, sweat beading on her upper lip, was that he looked like the Buddha statue Florence's brother had brought back from Japan or somewhere. But instead of a diaper, Cooley had on his workpants and a t-shirt that girdled his belly rolls.

Edna decided to give her husband one last chance. She unfolded the map and balanced it on the steering wheel and her lap. Minutes passed. Realizing Cooley wasn't going to budge or yell what-for to her, she pushed the map to the side, put her car in reverse, and backed out of the gravel drive. She took one last look at her husband, his head arched back as he blew smoke, then pressed hard on the gas.

As Edna breezed down highway 58, she realized she hadn't stopped at her mother's. She didn't think about turning back. She knew her mother would learn of her

leaving from Cooley or the same tongues that wagged about his doings on Front Street. Let them talk, she decided. Let Cooley explain why his wife drove all the way to California to get away from him. Just let him. And as she pictured him standing before an angry mob demanding to know why he had driven his wife away, Edna smiled. She regretted that she was going to miss the fun.

Cooley had wanted to laugh all morning, from the moment he sat at the table, trying to behave like Gary Cooper, that lanky actor all the ladies liked, until Edna sent graveling flying across the yard, but he hadn't. Now, he laughed so hard his side ached. He recalled her bursting out of the door, suitcases banging her thighs at every step. And she wore that god-awful dress, the one that reminded him of his mother's couch. The memory tickled Cooley, and he started to choke on the fizz of the Dr. Pepper.

Cooley figured Edna would stay at her mother's until tomorrow or the next day, and the idea of twenty-four hours or more without her delighted him. The freedom made him feel so good that he decided to have another Dr. Pepper with peanuts before he finished planting herbs in the garden. And when Cooley was done with that, he would shower and spend a lazy afternoon with Missy on Front Street. Maybe he would even stay for dinner.

Cooley stretched his arms and sighed. Life was good.

Cooley and Missy Hawkins sat at her kitchen table eating supper, chunks of cornbread in sweet buttermilk. Neither of them spoke. The quiet was broken by sounds of spoons hitting bowls and the laughter of men gathered outside the corner bar on Front Street. Their gaiety echoed Cooley's own good spirits. As he slowly chewed his dinner, he compared the peaceful quiet of Missy to the angry silence of Edna. When he was a teenager and just starting to eye the girls, his Pawpaw had told him that there were two kinds of women -- those who were easy to get along with and those who were not. Edna

was the first kind until they married. Then she changed. Cooley knew he had done some things that had made Edna mad -- things that he felt should have been natural between a husband and wife -- but her anger seemed unreasonable. It was as though she was mad at the world and he couldn't do anything to make her happy. Cooley felt a sadness sliding into his heart. If he ever had a grandson of his own, he would tell him: beware of a woman whose silence seethes rather than soothes.

Cooley studied Missy as she buttered a piece of cornbread with slow, even strokes. It had been four years since she came into the store with her neighbor, Ben, the old man who worked at Godwin's Hardware and Appliance on Saturdays and any other days that Cooley wanted off. Missy had just come home from Bible college, where she studied voice on scholarship, to tend to her sick mother. The young woman had impressed Cooley. Although she wore a simple polka dot dress, the kind that could be found in any department store in town, she was different from the other women in South Norfolk. She didn't try to hide her olive skin with light make-up, and her hair didn't have those tight curls that stayed coiled even in the rain. But what really got to him was the confident way she looked him straight in the eyes while she moistened her lips, then smiled and said, "Glad to meet you." Almost like a dare. He had never seen a woman do that, not without turning her eyes away.

During the next few months, Missy often walked to Godwin's in the afternoon to pick up a tube of caulk, a can of paint or whatever else Ben needed for making repairs at the Hawkins' home. She volunteered for the errands, she told Cooley, because they spelled her from the tedium of waiting for her mother to die. Missy took her time on these trips, browsing the aisles of screwdrivers and copper tubing like they were the make-up counters at Woolworth's, and Cooley realized that she wanted to buy conversation as much as anything. So, they talked. They talked about Ben's projects, music, her Creole ancestry through a father she never knew, and anything else that came

to mind. Soon, Cooley became comfortable enough to issue his own dare. "Missy," he said, "sing for me."

She laughed. "I'm not about to sing in a hardware store where God-knows-who might walk in." She laughed again, and Cooley noticed how the vee at the hollow of her throat vibrated with the sound. He wanted to remove her gold chain with a crucifix and touch her there.

Missy didn't come into the store for a month after her mother died, and he missed her. When she reappeared on St. Patrick's Day, she acted like no time had passed at all. She took her time, strolling the aisles while he unpacked a shipment of plumbing parts. Cooley felt a bit nervous, even shy, but he was careful not to show it. He tried to concentrate on his work, and he had just restocked the female adapters when he felt a hand on his butt, then a squeeze. His pelvis bucked at the touch.

Missy laid her hand on his shoulder and whispered, "You're not wearing green."

Cooley continued to feel her breath in his ear as he watched her move, the slow roll of her hips, past the plumbing supplies, on toward the display of lighting fixtures at the front of the store. At the door, she turned toward him and placed her hand on her breast.

"If you want to hear me sing, come by the house."

Cooley stared bewitched as he watched her leave. Perhaps it was his imagination, but he thought he heard a challenge in her invitation, and he wondered exactly what she had in mind.

At four, Cooley closed the store and drove to the Hawkins' house, a small white cottage tucked between Ebenezer Baptist Church and Joe's Slow Grill on Front Street. Men, looking down on their luck, loitered outside of the bar next door, and he felt them glower as he knocked. He wondered if they were her brothers. He counted the men, sized them up, and thought about turning around and going home when he heard Missy call "Come in" from a screened window. He was relieved to step inside. The parlor

glowed orange from the afternoon sun. The room, small with well-worn furniture, had a familiar feel about it. There was something, Cooley thought as he examined the collection of little porcelain shoes on the coffee table, that reminded him of home.

He didn't hear Missy pad barefoot into the room, and he didn't know that she had been watching him stroke a pink rose on the toe of a slipper until he heard her laugh. "What did you expect? Stacks of Bibles? Voodoo dolls?"

Cooley started and blushed, and he felt his color deepen even more as he turned to look at her. "Oh God." She wore a maroon choir robe that showed one calf as she leaned next to a picture of The Last Supper hanging on the wall, and as Cooley stared at her, muttering, he couldn't help but wonder if she had on anything underneath. An hour later, after Missy had sung a popular hymn and a Billie Holliday song, after Cooley had stopped praying and wondering, after they both had dressed and gone to the door, he kissed Missy gently on the forehead. He had never felt so close to a woman.

"You're my own Amazing Grace." He kissed her again, this time on the lips, and as he walked out the door, knowing that he'd be back, he thought of her as a gift from God.

Since that time, Missy's voice had deepened from singing in church and the smoke-filled clubs along the waterfront. Her skin, though smooth, no longer looked like velvet, and her facial features had become more defined. Cooley appreciated her mature beauty as much as her youthful fullness but what still continued to make his heart race after four years was the exotic way her nostrils arched like a queen's. He liked to trace their lines with his finger, to kiss the sides of her nose.

Cooley watched Missy break her buttered bread as he swallowed the mush in his mouth and tongued bits of cornbread from his gums.

"Missy?"

She looked up, waiting for him to go on.

"This sure is good, one of my favorites." It was the first meal he had taken with Missy. He didn't tell her that Edna refused to serve cornbread and buttermilk for supper, that she didn't consider it a proper meal. Except for the nights she fixed spaghetti, Edna always served one meat, one green, one starch vegetable, bread and dessert.

"I'm glad you like it."

Missy smiled at Cooley, then placed a small piece of cornbread between her teeth. He noted the way the straps of her red gown caught the sides of her shoulder, and the sight stirred him. Cooley remembered how pleased Missy had been when he had given her the gown, dancing with it around the room. He recalled how loving she had been that afternoon. Those almost-perfect hours had been marred by Cooley's guilt. He had really bought the gift for his wife, who upon opening it, had said, "Red? That's for strumpets."

But Missy wasn't a strumpet; she was a good woman, one that Edna could learn a few lessons from. And at that moment, Cooley wondered if Missy was the kind of woman he should have married.

Missy hummed "Passed Me Not" as she cleared the table. Cooley lit a cigar pushed all thoughts of marriage from his mind; he wanted to enjoy the freedom of smoking inside and wearing his underclothes at the kitchen table in peace.

As Edna drove west through pasture land, her mind raced from one wrong that Cooley had done to another. Her list of his sexual perversions -- one included cherry cobbler and the kitchen table -- was long, but she kept returning to the two that made her the maddest, his messing around on Front Street and that business he had tried the other morning. Edna felt like spitting. She swore that, in time, Cooley would get his comeuppance, if not from her, then from God.

By the time the gas needle quivered on the quarter-tank line, Edna had driven two hours without any idea of where she was or how she got there. She slowed, hoping to

glimpse a sign directing her to a filling station. Edna felt anxious. She had never let the gas tank level fall below a quarter of a tank; it was too risky.

The trees fell to pastureland on both sides of the road. In between fenced fields of cows grazing, Edna spotted a rusty sign that read "Sunoco." She pulled onto dirt path that arced between two pumps and a sun-blistered house and stopped, hoping that someone still lived there. While she waited for an attendant, Edna spread her map across the steering wheel, and with her finger, she quickly found a maze of roads that would lead her from Richmond to San Diego. She couldn't, however, figure out where she was in relation to South Norfolk and was close to giving up on locating her whereabouts and getting gas when a shadow fell over the map.

"Help you, Ma'am?"

Edna looked up. The sun made a silhouette of the attendant. She shielded her eyes and tried to make out the features of the person at her side.

"Fill her up, please."

As the attendant moved to the tank, Edna looked in her rear view mirror and stared at the bulk in bib overalls. It was the first time she had ever seen a woman pump gas.

While the tank filled, the woman lifted the hood, checked the oil, and washed the front and rear windows, and as she worked, Edna watched. She was so stunned that a woman, and possibly a pregnant one at that -- her bib pooched out -- worked at a filling station, that it was some time later that she noticed the attendant had missed spots of bird droppings on the windshield. As the woman moved to shut off the pump, Edna turned and stretched her head out the window.

"Where do I catch the road to Richmond?" She caught a side view of the attendant.

"About a dozen miles back. Take route 412." The woman hung up the gas nozzle, put the cap back on the tank, and walked up to Edna's window. "That'll be six dollars, Ma'am."

Edna fumbled with her wallet, then pulled out two crisp bills, a five and a one.

"What if I keep going the same way on this road? Would I ever get out of Virginia?" Edna handed the money to the woman, then looked up and cupped her hand at her eyebrows.

"Nope."

"Where would I end up?"

"South Norfolk."

As the woman stepped away from the car, Edna turned the ignition key, slowly pulled to the road, and stopped. A single car whizzed by while she sat there for a few moments, thinking about the pregnant woman and life's funny turns. If Edna went back down the road, she'd be on her way to California. If she went forward, she'd end up at home.

She spent her first night on the road, her first night alone in her whole life, in a motor lodge outside of Charlottesville. Edna felt nervous about checking into the Mountain View Motel; she felt like she needed a good reason to be there. So when the desk clerk handed her the registration sheet, she said, "I'm going to Chicago. My sister just had a baby." She hated lying but when she realized the clerk believed her, she elaborated on her story: "My brother-in-law got transferred there. Big promotion with International Cash Register Company." By the time she was done with her tale -- it lasted through inspections of three rooms -- Edna felt quite proud of herself. Her confidence was still soaring after the clerk lugged her suitcase into room number three, handed her a key, and apologized as he closed the door: "The water from the tap might look a little dark, but it's nothing to worry about. Just minerals. Enjoy your stay."

A few minutes later, her euphoria evaporated as she watched orange water fill the clean but rust-stained tub. When she realized that the water was not going to run clear, that a bath would do more harm than good, she pulled the drain plug and watched the water whirl away, leaving specks of brown and black on the bottom of the tub. She would make do for the night, she decided, by cleaning herself with a wash cloth soaked with witch hazel and by rinsing her mouth with a solution of hydrogen peroxide and Nehi orange drink.

Feeling refreshed, resourceful, Edna crawled onto the soft feather bed and rolled to its center so the mattress cradled her. She was warm, tired, ready for a good night's rest, but as she lay there the creaking of the heating system, the sounds of muffled voices in the next room and the smell of mildew put her on edge. The strangeness of her surroundings sharpened her senses. Between bouts of sleep, disturbed by the sound of her own heart beat, she sneezed and tossed and turned.

By daybreak, she had given up on trying to rest. Her muscles ached as she hunched over the steering wheel and slowly wove her way through the Blue Ridge Mountains. An early morning fog hid what lay before her, and her anxiety about navigating the ups, downs and sudden curves of the road made her stomach knot. Sometimes, on ascents, Edna felt like she was driving through clouds that reached to heaven and that, at any moment, a band of angels would lift the Buick onto their shoulders and fly her into the white light of God. But the road between pines fell as often as it rose, and its steep declines made Edna afraid that the road would just stop, that she and the Buick would drop off the edge of the mountain and tumble in slow motion forever. She tightened her grip on the steering wheel; she wished that she'd said good-bye to her mother and Florence.

By mid-morning, the heat of the sun had burned off the fog and Edna had picked up speed. She began to relax as she rolled her head and shoulders in circles to loosen the stiffness that had settled into her neck and back. She flexed her fingers until color

returned to her white knuckles, and as her muscles stretched and her joints cracked, Edna noticed a yellow- and orange-striped quarry to her right. The pit was a scar on the land, and its ugliness riled her. She wanted to spit on the miners who had stripped the land of beauty, who had taken away precious minerals without giving anything in return, and the intensity of her feelings surprised Edna, who had never thought much about land one way or the other. But curling toward the blue spires of the mountains and winding back down again through lush, green valleys had awakened something in her. The grandeur of all that laid around her made Edna feel weepy. She sniffled, trying to unplug her nose.

Further down the road, safe from dynamite explosions, sat a mining camp, and the sight of it reminded her of growing up on Blue Mountain, the years before Emmett rescued her family from poverty and the scorn of the children with two parents. Because the memories made Edna feel little, dirty and ashamed, she tried to forget her childhood. But she couldn't. Unexpected triggers, like the smell of tar, the wink of an eye, flashed images of life on Blue Mountain through her brain like streaks of lightning, and each memory squeezed her heart so hard that by the time the series ended, she felt bruised and spent.

Edna had never told Cooley about the house she grew up in, the weather-warped boards without right angles, the tar roof that oozed black goo in the summer. As she inhaled the fresh spring air circulating through the car, she conjured up the smell of tar, felt it waft up through her nostrils, then burn down her body, making her stomach turn. The burn turned to chills as she remembered listening to the plinking of rain water hitting enamel bowls as she lay next to her sister and awaited sleep at night. She tuned her ears to the tinny sounds in order to drown out the moans, like pigs in pain, that came from the other side of the drapery that divided the one-room shanty.

More than once during recess, children at school had shouted to her, "Hey, girl, who's your daddy this week?" The question had paralyzed her vocal cords, made her burn with shame, sent her hiding into the woods at the edge of the schoolyard until the

bell rang. When she was alone, leaning against the bend of a dogwood tree, Edna had comforted herself with the knowledge that she shared her father's name. She dreamt that Lyle Henry was in a big city making lots of money and that one day he would return to Blue Mountain to claim her as his daughter, to walk with her through town, to show everyone how rich and handsome he was. And she would let her sister walk with them, too, although Edna knew that Lucy was born a Henry more than two years after Lyle left.

Her dream was so intense and so frequent that it eventually became a prayer to fill her loneliness, to make her feel safe and protected from the appraising eyes of black-pored miners who strayed the mile from the new trailer park to her mother's house, looking and willing to pay for comfort. Her first hope that God might answer her prayer came when Emmett Rountree, a homely but clean traveling tool salesman from Staunton, visited without staying the night. After six months of chaste courting that included bringing hams and working on the house, he announced that he had accepted a job with a machine shop in Norfolk. Edna remembered the afternoon clearly. She remembered how her heart dropped to her stomach, how her mother offered congratulations and then slowly turned her narrow shoulders away so Emmett wouldn't see her tears. And she remembered how he gently lay his hands on her mother's arms, turned her towards him and made her listen as he proposed. She could still see his shy smile as he asked the girls if they would mind him being their daddy.

The road eased into a gentle roll. "Thank God for Emmett Rountree." As she said the words, it dawned on Edna that she had never thanked her stepfather for rescuing her from the meaness of schoolchildren, nights of sleepless worry and black-pored miners with pitted faces, and she decided to set things right that night by writing him a card. She pictured him receiving it. Cheered by the image, she began singing "She'll Be Coming Around the Mountain." When she looked at her rear-view mirror, the road winding down from the mountain was empty as far as she could see, and as she sped

across the West Virginia-Ohio border toward the plains of the Midwest and the sunsets over the Pacific, she decided to leave her memories of Blue Mountain behind.

As the Buick breezed southwest across Missouri on Route 66, Edna sang "California, Here I Come." The air swallowed notes that Edna strained to reach but she sang on until the back wheels of the Buick rolled inside the Oklahoma state line. "Five states down, six to go," she shouted with gusto; her insides swelled with pride.

A few miles outside Tulsa, the Buick started wheezing and bucking as steam seeped upward from the crevices of its hood. The engine gurgled, then died, but the motion of the wheels had enough go left for Edna to steer the car onto the soft shoulder of the road.

Chapter 3. Oklahoma

"Damn, damn, damn." The curse words, the first to ever come out of her mouth, make Edna feel strong and in charge, and she silently vowed that she had come too far to let the Buick get the best of her. "Damn it all to hell."

She pushed open the car door and stomped through a scraggle of weeds to the front of the car. As steam billowed up and away from the hood, she stood in the scorching sun, arms crossed, cursing, and a bit surprised with the ease that the words rolled from her mouth. After she had used up all the ones she knew, she took in the landscape around her.

When Edna had first crossed the state line, she had been surprised by the evergreened hills and winding creeks that linked Quapaw and Commerce. From the newsreels that she had seen as a teenager, she had come to think of Oklahoma as one big dust bowl, fit for neither man nor beast. But as she reached the outskirts of Tulsa, the terrain had changed to flatland. Diners advertised chili and broasted chicken; Phillips 66 filling stations stood every couple of miles or so; and all of the motor courts claimed Will Rogers had once slept there. The only houses were mobile homes parked here and there, as if their owners had been too tired to pull them any farther, and the sight of them, their suggestion of transience, made Edna feel as though she had driven in a wasteland where people only passed through because they had to.

Admitting that she was at a loss to do anything until help arrived, Edna pulled a warm grape soda, a pair of cat's eyes sunglasses and two white towels from the backseat of the Buick. As her breast brushed against the frame of the car door, Edna flinched in pain. The memory of her mother asking if she had any tenderness in her breasts flickered

through her brain, but she quickly counted up the days and figured it was time for her monthly. Again.

Edna walked to the back of the Buick where she placed one terry cloth square on its hot bumper, then perched herself on it. Rather than risk ruining her good hat, Edna draped the other towel over her hair and forehead so her face wouldn't burn. She didn't want to look like one of those crepe-skinned women who worked in the fields for a living.

Five minutes passed without a car or truck going by. Ashamed that she had cursed and aware that she might soon need God's help, Edna began to pray: "Dear Lord, please forgive me for letting the devil take over my mouth and issue those unclean words. I will try my hardest to use my mouth only as an instrument of praise for You now and forever more. And dear Lord, I have faith that You will see me through this trial, that You will deliver me from this predicament and see me safely to where I belong. . ." Edna paused a moment and wondered where that was. "Dear Lord, I have faith that You will send me help as You see fit. Amen."

When she opened eyes and looked down the two-lane highway, she saw a vision with a wavy aura around it. She couldn't make out exactly what the vision was, but it looked tall and gray, like a moving monument. Her heart quickened at the sight. As the apparition drew nearer, Edna made out the form of a man on horseback, and the fact that God had sent a white knight to do His work tickled her. But as the image came closer, Edna stopped laughing. It was an Indian.

Edna adjusted the towel hanging over her head and slid her sunglasses down the slope of her nose so she could get a better look. As the Indian came within spitting distance, she folded her arms across her chest, stared and decided she didn't like what she saw. He looked a little crazy. Black hair poking out from his hat like a woman's. Those soft-looking shoes, maybe even bedroom slippers, on his feet. But what really made her skin crawl, made her feel threatened, were the pits on his brown face, scars like so many

of the miners had. Edna made up her mind that if he touched her, she would fight for her life, even if it meant taking his. She pushed her sunglasses back up, then tightened her grip around the soda pop bottle.

The Indian guided his spotted horse -- the smell made her gag -- past the bumper to the front of the Buick and stopped, but Edna didn't budge, didn't even turn around to see what he was up to. She waited for the clopping of the hooves to start, to signal that she was safe. The silence hung on, setting her nerves on edge as her mind searched for other means of defense. She could jab out his eyes with her car keys, but they were in the ignition. She could stab him with her fingernail file, but it was tucked away in her purse. As she was pondering how to use the towels, the Indian spoke.

"Ma'am, can I help? Give you a ride into town?"

Edna flinched at his gall, to think that she was dumb enough to crawl up on that stinky horse so he could ride off and have his way with her.

"No, thank you." She clipped her words so he would know that she meant business.

"Would you like me to send help from town?"

Edna pictured a band of wild savages riding toward her, sweeping her off her feet, and keeping her prisoner in a teepee.

"No, thank you. My husband should be back any moment." Edna smoothed the towel on her hair and kept her eyes on the highway as she waited for the Indian to try to coax her into his lair. But words didn't follow. Instead, she heard the clopping of hooves as the Indian continued toward Salpulpa. Edna slumped with relief.

"He knew I wasn't anyone to tangle with." She searched the Buick for weapons -- keys, a fingernail file, a razor blade -- to stuff in her pockets, then returned to her post on the bumper. As soon as she had situated herself, a pale, yellow Ford, freshy waxed, slowed by and pulled off the side of the road. She could see a blonde woman on the

passenger side turn to look at her. A medium-size man in a charcoal suit got out, strode over to Edna, and tipped his hat.

"Robert Maxwell. Call me Max." He set his hat back on his head and jerked its brim down a bit. As he reached to shake her hand, Edna noticed a silver, monogrammed cuff link pinning his sleeve together. She looked at his face, admired his rugged features that had been softened by crow's feet and slightly slackened skin, and figured that he was at least ten years older than Cooley, who wasn't looking so great at forty.

"Car trouble?"

"Yes, sir. It started coughing, smoking. . ." Edna paused to pull the towel from her head, "then it just upped and died." As he popped the hood latch, Edna sensed a strength about this Max. Here was a man like Gary Cooper, she decided, who could take charge, who could get things done. She would be glad to turn her troubles over to him.

The man propped up the hood and looked under it, making little grunting sounds as he tugged on wires and twisted caps. He stood back and brushed his palms together to shake off the grimy dust from the Buick.

"Ma'am, you got a hole in your radiator. This car isn't going anywhere." He slammed the hood down, then turned to Edna with a look of sympathy in his dark, hooded eyes, eyes that reminded her of Jesus. "You live around here?"

Edna, relieved that God had sent this Good Samaritan to save her, poured out the story of her travels, part fact, part fiction; then, after apologizing for her less-than-fresh appearance and spent by her roller-coaster of emotions, she ended her spiel by asking for a ride to the nearest town.

"Now, now, don't you worry," he assured her, "Sugar and I are glad to help. Let's just grab your bags, and we'll get on the road."

By the time Edna settled into the backseat of the Ford -- it was made of soft, bumpy leather -- she had learned that her benefactors were oil people, church-goers from

Tulsa, and although she thought their names were a bit odd, Edna decided that Sugar and Max were her kind of people -- respectable, religious and rich.

"We try to live our lives by the Golden Rule," said Sugar, toying with a gold crucifix earring dangling from her right lobe. "That's why we feel blessed to be able to help you."

Edna slumped against the seat and thanked God for sending her two angels. Suddenly, she felt a swerve, then one bump after another. Her first thought was that the car had had a flat but as she straightened up to ask what was wrong, the car stopped and Max turned to her, waving a small gun in her face.

"Now, girlie, it's your turn to help us. Give me your purse." He reached over the seat, snatched her bag from her hands, and passed it to Sugar, who flashed her an isn't-this-fun grin. As Edna stared at the black hole of the barrel, her mouth turned cotton, her palms poured sweat, and her muscles twitched, causing one side of her lip to quiver, her fingers to jerk. She wished that she could shrink and disappear or that someone would start laughing and say "Gotcha." But her fear told her that the gun was no joke, and she wondered who would tell her Mama and Cooley that she had been found dead off Route 66, shot to death by killers, then pecked to pieces by vultures.

"Twenty-seven lousy bucks." Sugar fanned the money in the air. "Well, what did we expect from a hick from Virginia?"

The name-calling, especially from an Okie, made Edna feel smaller than the pistol pointed at her face. She wanted to tell the couple that she had married into one of the First Families of Virginia, that her husband was a successful businessman, that she lived in a nice, big white house in South Norfolk, but she kept her mouth shut.

"Max, honey, let's not waste time searching her luggage. You can tell by looking at her, she doesn't have anything." The woman folded the bills and tucked them inside her silk blouse. "Let her go."

Max gestured with the gun. "Get out."

Edna looked at the mean-looking scar that ran from the corner of his eye to his cheek, his thin lips, then at the empty field that seemed to go on forever.

"Here?" Her voice quavered. The idea of vultures eating her alive frightened her more than the thought of them attacking her dead, lifeless body.

He nodded. "Now."

As she pushed her way out of the car, snagging her stockings, dragging her two pieces of luggage behind her, she felt something, her purse, hit her back. She heard the engine roar, the car wheels spin, spraying clods of dirt onto her. The car finally tore off, leaving Edna, her dress soiled, her stocking ruined and her feelings bruised, alone in the middle of nowhere.

As she walked the mile and a half to Sapulpa, her suitcases banging against her knees with every step, Edna tried to count her blessings: good health and five hundred dollars rolled in a knot of stockings in her luggage. If the car repair wasn't too expensive, she would still have enough money to go on to San Diego and open up a boarding house. She ignored offers of rides as she walked; she decided it was better to rely on herself than to depend on the kindness of strangers.

By the time she straggled into Cowgirl Ruth's Diner and Motor Court, Edna was tired and hungry, but in some odd way, she felt stronger than she had ever been in her life. She headed straight to the ladies room to freshen up and to take \$10 from her bankroll. As she removed her sunglasses and gazed into the mirror, she froze at the image before her. A scarlet face with raccoon eyes. She was almost glad that she was far away from where lily white skin was considered a mark of breeding. She turned on the faucet and splashed water onto her face and arms; its coolness soothed the pulsing burn. Rather than risk ruining another nylon, Edna decided to go bare-legged in this land of savages and outlaws, to save her good things to wear where they would really matter.

She peeled off the bad stocking and threw it into the trash; she rolled the good one with the others and stuffed them into her suitcase.

The dining room had few customers. Edna slung her suitcases onto one seat of an empty booth and slid onto the other side. She didn't need to study the menu for long; the Will Rogers Special -- a Western omelet with fries -- and a root beer sent her taste buds watering. As she waited for her order, Edna surveyed the restaurant. Wagon wheels and tomahawks hung on the walls alongside old-timey sepia pictures of men in chaps and cowboy hats. Cow creamers and salt and pepper shakers shaped like teepees, sat on the red-topped tables. And in the corner, just above where someone sat, was a stuffed antelope head. As her eyes dropped to the customer drinking coffee, Edna started. It was that crazy-looking Indian man. She huddled in the corner of her booth.

The waitress, dressed in a red-and-white gingham dress too youthful for her age, smiled at Edna as she placed her food on the table.

"There you go, honey. A cowboy with spurs and a suds."

Edna struggled to return her warmth but her lips felt tight from her sunburn. "Thank you."

"Ketchup?"

"Please." Edna forked a slice of omelet into her mouth, curious to see what eggs with cheese and onions and sauce on top tasted like. As she chewed slowly, she thought it might possibly be the best food she had ever eaten. She committed the mixture to memory so she could fix her own omelets once once she had settled into her boarding house.

The waitress placed the ketchup on the table. "Anything else?"

"No, thank you." Edna cleared her throat. "Do you have a telephone I could use? My car's broken down a ways from here."

"One in the back office. Just let me know when you're ready. There's a Phillips 66 down the road that has a right good mechanic." The woman stuck her hands into her

apron pockets and watched as Edna stuffed two french fries in her mouth at once. "Good appetite you got."

She nodded, smiled, her cheeks full.

The waitress continued to gaze, making Edna think that she had food smeared on her face. She reached for a napkin.

"You're not from around here."

Edna swallowed, then wiped her mouth. She wondered if she had smudged her lipstick across her face.

"I'm from Virginia."

"Well, you sure are a long way from home."

Edna knew what the old woman was after, but she wasn't going to tell any more than she had to. If there was one thing she had learned on the road, it was not to trust every Tom, Dick and Harry you met. She chugged her root beer, her eyes focused on the pale green bottle, and wished the woman would let her finish her meal in peace.

But the waitress wouldn't. She pushed Edna's luggage toward the wall, sat on the edge of the booth seat, and leaned forward.

"Honey, something tells me you got troubles. I'll tell you what." Her voice dropped like a woman with a secret to tell. "If you need a place to sleep for a night or so, you can stay here, and rather than pay me, you can help out in the diner until your car is repaired."

Edna looked up from her plate, almost clean except for streaks of ketchup and a pickle stem. She looked into the woman's eyes to read her intent, but all she could see was kindness and concern. Her heart wanted to believe what she read there, but experience had taught her not to trust her heart.

"Thank you for your offer. I guess I'll see what the mechanic says first." Before Edna could ask the woman to show her to the telephone, the Indian man, nodding to the old woman, then Edna, passed the table.

"See you later, Hank," the waitress called as he pushed open the glass door.

Edna, squinting, sat slumped in her seat, feeling a little sick. The closeness of the Indian man had sent her stomach turning, and the friendliness with which the old woman had spoken to him made Edna question what kind of people surrounded her.

"Who was that man?" Edna tried hard not to spit out the words as she fidgeted with the napkin in her hands.

"That's Hank Dreamwater," the woman answered as she reached for Edna's plate and empty soda bottle. "He's the preacher at the Baptist church here. He's a good man. None better." As she rose from the booth to return to work, she stopped and smiled once more. "By the way, my name is Ruth."

That evening, Edna called home from Ruth's office. As she waited for the operator to ring her mother, she arranged the papers strewn atop the desk into one large stack. After a minute into the conversation, she regretted phoning. Her mother wanted to waste money arguing long distance, telling her she belonged at home with her husband who needed her.

"He's lost without you. Couldn't figure how to wash clothes without the colors bleeding, so he's had to get someone to do them."

As she listened to her mother ramble, Edna pictured Cooley sitting on the porch, his tee-shirt a pale pink, his khakis dabbed with streaks of blue.

"And he's lost a lot of weight in the past week or two."

Edna didn't like this bit of news; she would rather he stay fat. It wasn't fair that he finally started slimming down now that she had left town, and she wondered how he looked. She closed her eyes and tried to picture him, but she couldn't imagine a white-haired Cooley without a belly.

"And I told him you know about that Hawkins woman. He feels real bad that he hurt you."

Edna heart jumped; her insides stirred. She was peeved that her mother had gotten into her and Cooley's personal business, but she felt good that he felt bad. It was about time the shoe was on the other foot.

When she hung up from talking to her mother, Edna felt tired and bruised, like she had been run over by a stampede of wild horses. A call to Florence, who was thrilled by Edna's adventure and couldn't wait to tell everyone about it, didn't make her feel any better. Florence reported that Cooley had passed out the other day from heart trouble. But he was okay, she said. The doctor had put him on blood-pressure pills.

"It's supposed to be a secret."

As she listened to Florence pause and wait for Edna to ask "why," she sensed that she was about to learn something that she didn't want to know.

"I hear tell," she continued, "he fell at Missy Hawkins' house."

Edna's emotions fought each other, causing her heart to swell close to bursting. Cooley's sickness saddened her, yet, she half-wished he had gone on and died on Front Street. The thought made her feel guilty, made her question what kind of Christian she was, and she silently repented for her meanness.

"I also hear he's not seeing her anymore."

She was suspicious of this last bit of news, and she wondered if he stopped his visits because of his heart -- or her.

Edna couldn't sleep as she tossed and turned in the single bed framed with two by fours. So many things weighed on her mind. She knew that she was shirking her civic duty by not reporting the robbers to the police, but she didn't want to stay in Sapulpa any longer than necessary. She was already stuck there for at least a day or two. The mechanic couldn't tow her car until tomorrow. And the news about Cooley swirled through her brain. She couldn't make heads or tails of what he was thinking. She had a hard enough time keeping her own thinking straight.

After a while, Edna's thoughts eased into a dream. She was flying. She could see herself so clearly: she wore a white gown, and her auburn hair blew as she flew high enough to see the outline of the whole United States. And as she soared, drops of blood fell from her heart and sprinkled the land below.

The next morning, Edna viewed herself in the door mirror. She felt all fat and bloated as though it was time for her monthly, and she was none too crazy about the gingham dress and apron that she had on -- it made her look like she was ready for a square dance; even worse, the red checks matched her face -- but she knew better than to bite the hand that would feed her three square meals a day. She bobby-pinned her hair net and headed for breakfast.

Except for Ruth and the beefy cook, Shorty, the diner was empty when Edna sat down at six. She scanned the menu, noted that the breakfast she had cooked for Cooley the past nine years was called the Will Rogers Round-up, and ordered a cup of coffee, black. A half-hour later, after learning where the dishes, utensils and condiments were kept and how to take, place and ring up an order, Edna waited behind the counter, pacing, for her first customer. The yellow and brown splatters on the linoleum, the white sludge on the rotor of the milk-shake machine, and the dirty dishes stacked in a tub under the counter next to a tray of clean glasses with spots made Edna fidgety. She needed to clean, to feel the tingle of ammonia fumes in her nose.

"Ruth, where do you keep your cleaning supplies? I could tidy up a bit 'til someone comes in." She stuck her hands in the apron pockets as she waited for the old woman, seated at a booth tallying receipts, to answer.

"Have at it." Ruth licked the tip of her pencil. "In the closet out back."

As Edna scrubbed the rotor of the milk-shake machine and loosened strips of hardened cream from its seams with a toothpick, she wondered what Cooley was having for breakfast, and she giggled at the thought of him frying an egg. Moments later,

however, her wonder turned to worry as she envisioned stack of dirty pots and pans towering toward the ceiling, and she had couldn't blank out the picture in her mind until she recalled the morning that she had awakened by choking.

She shifted her thoughts to San Diego. She could see her boarding house: big, white, two stories with trellised roses climbing its sides. And as she imagined the G.I.s who would live there -- honorable young war heroes trained in combat and personal hygiene -- saw them sitting in her kitchen, she heard her name being called.

"Edna. Shake a leg. You got a customer."

Edna tossed the toothpick into garbage that slightly smelled of milk just starting to sour, and scanned the dining room. Below the antelope head sat the crazy-looking Indian, and, she noted with disgust, that he hadn't even bothered to take off his hat. The idea of waiting on him repelled her, but she didn't have a choice. Edna grabbed an order pad and headed to his table.

Pleased that she had managed to hold her head up, take his order, and pour coffee without saying two words, Edna returned to serve his three pigs in a blanket and one egg. Just as she set the lariat-edged plate on the table, he spoke.

"You're the lady from yesterday. The one with the towel on her head."

Edna cringed at the words but said nothing, afraid that talk would encourage him to ask about her husband. She tried to force a smile, tried to look him in the eyes, but she was caught by the pits on his face.

"I'm glad to see you got to town safely." The Indian turned his attention from Edna to his plate and started sawing a sausage poking from a pancake. His calm irritated her like a splinter under the skin.

As she returned to her work at the milk-shake machine, Edna swore that there was no way that Indian was going to make her look like a fool. She would never tell him or anybody else about the robbers on Route 66.

Edna itched to get back on the road, but after a week in Sapulpa, there were still complications with her car. The Buick dealership in Tulsa didn't stock all the parts that Leo, the mechanic at the Phillips 66 station, needed to fix her water pump and radiator. He promised her, however, that Detroit was sending everything required for repair by parcel post. "Everything," he said during a quick stop at the diner to pick up a pint of chili -- a bowl of red to go, "should be here in another week or two."

Edna contemplated this news as she ate a wing of broasted chicken. Another week or two at Cowgirl Ruth's Diner and Motor Court and God only knows what she would sink to. Ruth and a couple of the regulars had already laughed at her for using a knife and fork to cut up her chicken, so she had taken to eating with her fingers. But she had drawn the line at licking them. And Shorty, a man with tattoos of half-naked women wrapped around his forearms, had talked her into playing cards during a slow spell. He had wanted to play poker, but she held fast to her refusal to gamble. They had finally settled on crazy eights.

Edna laid the chicken bone, sucked clean of meat, on her plate, and crossed her eyes on the white flake at the tip of her peeling nose. She picked the dead skin, wiped it on her napkin, then glanced around to make sure no one saw her. Hank Dreamwater stared back and smiled.

An hour later, as she sat writing postcards to her mother and Florence and the smell of hamburgers frying wafted through the diner, Edna's head began to swim, her stomach started to flip. She felt like she needed to lie down, but, suddenly, as she rose from her chair, a warm liquid gushed from her belly, out through her mouth and onto the postcards that laid in front of her. Before she could grab a handful of napkins from the dispenser, another wave of nausea flooded her, and she heaved again.

She heard Ruth yell: "Oh, my God. Shorty, get something to clean that mess up -- now," and a moment later she felt the old woman place a damp cloth against her

forehead. Although its coolness helped Edna to clear her mind, her insides continued to quiver.

"The smell. I can't stand the smell." She gasped, then held her breath again.

"It's making me sick, too." Ruth put an arm around Edna's shoulder and helped her up. "Let's get you back to your room. You're paler than a ghost on Sunday."

Outside the diner, once Edna's stomach started to settle and her breathing returned to normal, she shook off the old woman's arm.

"I'm fine now. I'll be okay. Really." She wanted to brush her teeth to rid her mouth of the sourness but the conjured smell of the toothpaste made her stomach jump.

"You might have the flu." Ruth placed her hand on Edna's back as they walked the wood-planked path to her room. "I'm going to take you to the doctor's."

Edna shook her head. "No. I feel better already. That chicken didn't agree with me. That's all."

Ruth stopped. "Chicken? My chicken? You're saying it made you sick?" The old woman placed her hands on her narrow hips, faced Edna, and leaned toward her. "First, you come here insinuating that my diner is dirty, you, with your rag every minute, washing and wiping. And now you say my food poisoned you?" Ruth spun and stomped down the walk, her footsteps sounding like thunder. "You got some nerve. Well, we'll get to the truth of the matter." She stopped. "Get your pocketbook. We're going to the doctor."

The idea of wasting money on a doctor to tell her she had a touch of food poisoning made Edna want to spit nails, but the steel in Ruth's voice and eyes told her not to argue. She got her purse and walked to the truck. As she climbed onto the front seat, she thought it was a crying shame when old people made fools of themselves, started to lose their minds.

The sound of the truck's exhaust pipe scraping the pavement grated on Edna's nerves. She peered over and noticed that the gas gauge read empty. She considered

apologizing to Ruth for insinuating that the chicken made her sick but she couldn't -- it would have been a lie -- and she felt hurt that Ruth didn't appreciate her efforts to make the diner more sanitary. Edna decided to hold her ground in silence. She couldn't suggest that Ruth stop at the filling station and she silently fretted about what they would do when the truck ran out of gas. At least, she comforted herself, no one in his right mind would think about robbing people who rode in such a piece of junk.

By the time the truck turned onto a dusty drive that snaked up to the front of a log cabin, the sun started to slip from high in the sky, and Edna wondered if she would ever see it set over the Pacific.

Ruth knocked on the front door. Edna wanted to ask what kind of doctor did business in such a place, a square, brown box out in the middle of nowhere, but she held her tongue. It was a long walk back to the diner. When no one answered, Ruth grunted and stomped down the step from the stoop.

"Those two must be at it again." The old woman motioned Edna to follow her. "Let's go 'round back."

As they walked, dust flew about their shoes. Edna tried to tiptoe to keep the dirt still, but Ruth shuffling through the scrub, kicked up enough to powder both of them. Rounding the back corner of the house, they heard squeals and laughter coming from an open porch still being built. A few yards away, a horse, tethered to a tree with few leaves, snorted and slowly swished his tail. The smell of fresh dung made Edna feel queasy, and, in an effort to quell the wave of nausea rolling from her stomach to her throat, she tried not to inhale.

"Marilyn," Ruth hollered. "You got company."

Still holding her breath, Edna followed the old woman up the steps of the porch and paused by her side at the top, ready to make nice to whomever she was about to meet. But she gasped and lost all ability to speak as she saw what stood before her -- a

big white bathtub with the back of a naked man at one end and a woman, her breasts bobbing like apples, at the other. Edna stared as they laughed and splashed water at each other. She wanted to look away but couldn't. It was as if someone had cast a spell over her.

"Put some clothes on." Ruth, grinning, grabbed two towels hanging on the railing and held them toward the tub. "We got business to tend to."

Edna broke from her trance and blushed. The woman, red in the glow of the sun, rose and smiled. Small streams of water curved over her breasts, her belly, ran down her thighs, and merged into silver rivers at the tops of her knees. She took a towel from Ruth and wrapped it around her body, tucking one end under her arm, and stepped out of the bath. As the man began to push himself up, his back still toward her, Edna turned and waited for him to make himself decent. Her blood boiled. One part of her was mad that Ruth had gotten her into this mess; the other part couldn't wait to see what happened next. As she twisted her pocketbook straps, her thoughts wandered from the naked couple and the bath, to Epsom salts and the doctor. Where in the world was he?

"Edna."

She turned slowly toward Ruth.

"I think you know the reverend from the diner." Ruth gestured toward the man, his hair slick with water and a towel, draped like a loincloth, around his waist. "And this is his wife, Dr. Marilyn Dreamwater."

When Edna came to, she saw a face, somewhat blurry looming over her.

"Mama?" She recoiled from the warm breath on her face; it smelled like old coffee.

"No. It's Ruth."

Edna tried to recall someone with that name. She thought of Ruth in the Bible, tried to remember her story, but as the features of the woman above her came into focus

and the red-and-white dots on her chest sharpened into checks, Edna remembered where she was and the sorry events that had put her there. She closed her eyes, wishing that it was all a bad dream. By the time she opened them again, Ruth had been joined by the Indian woman, her damp hair twisted into two loose braids.

Edna scanned the room. It was small but clean, and its white walls were decorated with feathered twig hoops and yellowed portraits of Indians, some in costume, others in regular clothes. A book case stood next to one wall. Four of its shelves held pots with plants and glass canisters filled with roots, bark, bits of sticks. Stones -- gray, purple, yellow -- lay scattered on the bottom.

The Indian woman, so far silent, spoke.

"Congratulations."

Edna, leery, looked at the woman, dressed in a man's shirt and trousers, waiting for her to say more. She smelled trouble in this room that contained more nature inside than out.

"I haven't examined you, but I'm fairly sure you're going to have a baby."

The timbre of the Indian's voice, so soft, so steady, put her at ease until the sense of what she said reached the part of Edna's head that was still waking. As she struggled to sit up, to make sure her clothes were intact, the two woman smiled at Edna like they had given her a present that she had always wanted.

"I'm not pregnant." She put the pillow behind her back. "Can't be."

"And why is that?" asked Ruth, as she handed Edna another to bolster her back.

"Because," she said, "I've always taken care." Edna sniffed and looked away from the women, reluctant to talk any more, but she could sense that Ruth's impatience matched her own and that there would be no rest for the weary. At least not for the next few minutes.

"And how, Miss Smarty Pants, have you done that?"

The name-calling and talk of such private matters made Edna turn from the women, but she knew there was no dodging Ruth's question. She flopped onto her side, curled into a ball, and mumbled while staring at the stones.

"What was that?" Ruth asked.

"I said, I've been drinking ginger tea."

Her answer sent Ruth to whooping and hollering, calling her "the dumbest Southern gal" she'd ever met, and she continued until the Indian woman told her to hush. Edna's eyes teared; her nose ran. As she lay half-upright on her side, trying to sniffle silently, she wished that she could just disappear from the meanness around her, that she could go hide somewhere safe.

"Go on, Marilyn," Ruth said. "Tell her."

Edna closed her eyes and hugged a pillow, fearing what bad news, what evil would come next, and mixed within this dread of what was to come, was the question of her pregnancy. "Could it be, could it be, could it be" hammered away in her head.

She felt a hand rest gently on her shoulder, then move slowly in circles.

"Ed-na." It was the Indian woman speaking. Edna liked the way she made her name sound like something special, something precious. A bit soothed, she waited for her to go on.

"For many years, women drank ginger tea to prevent pregnancy," she paused, "but it doesn't work. It's an old wives' tale."

Edna broke from the lull that she had been lured into by the woman's voice, her hands.

"An old wives' tale? But all the women on Blue Mountain drank ginger tea. Including my mama." She waited for Ruth and the Indian to speak, to explain how a generation of women could be wrong, but they said nothing, and their silence made her rethink her words. First, she felt ignorant, then she got mad.

"Isn't that like the kettle calling the pot black?" Edna jabbed her finger at Marilyn Dreamwater. "A witch doctor calling ginger tea 'an old wives' tale?'" She flung her arms into the air, taking in the jars of herbs and roots, the stones, the magic hoops on the wall. "You, with all of your potions and hocus-pocus." Edna fought to control her anger as she felt bits of spit shoot from her mouth. The coarseness of the act embarrassed her, and she hoped no one had felt or noticed it.

Edna steeled her arms to her sides, her hands to her thighs. "Ruth, take me to a real doctor."

Like a mother warning a naughty child that enough is enough, Ruth raised an eyebrow at Edna, and turned to the Indian woman, who smiled and shrugged her shoulders as if to say "She's yours, not mine." Ruth's impatience, the other woman's amusement, further unnerved Edna.

Ruth pushed her palm in Edna's face.

"You just hold on. No reason to get snippy with me. I'm not the one who got you pregnant." Ruth dropped her hand and nodded toward her friend. "Marilyn is a real doctor, a G.P." She smiled and patted the woman on her back. "The first Indian woman to get her medical diploma from the state university."

Instinct told Edna to protest, to say it was all a lie, but she knew that as soon as she did, Ruth would prove her wrong. It seemed the old woman enjoyed making a fool out of her. Edna lay her head on the pillows to think.

"So," she paused to wipe her nose. "How do you know I'm pregnant?" She jerked the sheet to her breasts, drew her knees to her chest.

The doctor dug a wad of tissues from her pocket, handed it to Edna, and waited while she blew her nose.

"Your eyes, your skin, the curve of your belly," Dr. Dreamwater paused, "things Ruth told me." She took Edna's hand and smiled. "Not very doctor-like, I know, but soon as you're up to it, I'll examine you, find out how far along you are."

"You rest." She placed Edna's hand on the sheet and stepped back. "I'll fix you a glass of tea, then Ruth and I'll let you be 'til you're ready."

As Edna watched the doctor usher Ruth from the room, then shut the door behind them, she felt a loneliness slide under her skin, slither to her chest, wrap itself around her heart, and the fear that loneliness would wring it dry made her want to call after the two women, to ask them to stay close. She looked at the ceiling and how its waves of plaster caused shadows. She felt that if she found one spot and focused on it, she wouldn't cry. She stared and stared and stared, and after a while, the ceiling started to fall and rise, fall and rise, and in order to stop the panic that paralyzed her, she closed her eyes.

After she had returned from the Dreamwaters', Edna lay awake long into the night, thinking about her situation. She was alone, three-months pregnant and living in a podunk motor court in the middle of the United States with no way to escape, at least for the time being. Ruth, afraid that Edna's bouts of vomiting might spoil her food business, had suggested on the ride home that she clean rooms for a while. The idea of being a chambermaid ruffled Edna. She didn't like any names that made her feel that she had come down in the world. But she needed to work, to scrub away the sadness that had settled in her soul, so she had agreed.

She considered what to do once her car was ready. She could go back to Cooley with her tail between her legs, or she could press on. She thought about her mother on Blue Mountain and how she had raised her daughters by taking in men and laundry. She recalled the woman at the filling station at the start of her trip, how she was doing a man's job even though she looked ready to drop a baby. And hundreds of other women, mothers, whose husbands had not returned from the war, were raising children on their own. If they could do it, she could too.

Edna pictured herself again in the two-story white house in San Diego. This time she saw a baby sweetly sleeping in a basket as she folded clothes nearby, a toddler

banging pots and pans with a wooden spoon while she fixed dinner for her boarders, and a child, a red-headed girl with pigtails, whose name was Noreen, swinging and singing as Edna pruned hibiscus in the backyard. She liked what she saw.

Edna, crouched on hands and knees, rump in the air, stuck her head under a bed to reach for plates crusted with ketchup and crumbs. Darn it, she silently swore as ants tickled her calves, some people live like pigs. Two days earlier, when she had vacuumed the room let by a travelling salesman, she had found five Coca-Cola bottles filled with pee and a bunch of girlie magazines that smelled peculiar, and from the room next door she had removed empty potted meat tins and a pillow case filled with whiskey bottles.

As she pulled the last plate from under the bed, Edna watched a cockroach dart into hiding. She recalled how she had seen one in Bunny's diner in South Norfolk last April, scooting along the top of a booth. She had lost her appetite, left her country fried steak on her plate, and refused to eat there again. Cockroaches, she had told Cooley, were a sign of filth. She had never had a one in her house, and she wasn't about to step foot in a place that did. Now, here she was in Oklahoma, living on their breeding ground.

Edna pushed herself up from the floor and took the stack of dishes to the diner. As she dumped the plates into a basin of hot, sudsy water, she figured how much time she had left cleaning up other people's mess. If Leo's latest guess about her car was right, she would be behind the wheel of the Buick in four more days. Her dreams of driving off came to a stop as Ruth pushed her way through the swinging door.

"Lay out your best dress. We're having dinner at the Dreamwaters' tonight." Ruth snapped her fingers and spun herself full circle; her skirt flared like a bullfighter's cape, revealing toothpick legs and knobby knees. "And I don't want to hear any excuses."

Ruth's good humor had returned quickly, just after Edna had gotten up the gumption to apologize. Some people liked to milk others' regrets for all they were worth, but a simple "I'm sorry" set everything straight between them, and Edna admired the way the old woman could just forgive and forget.

"Okey dokey." Edna was tired of the diner menu; having dinner with the Dreamwaters sounded good to her. She and the reverend, who no longer reminded her of a miner, were on friendly footing, now that he had stopped calling her "the woman with the towel on her head." And Marilyn's spirit made Edna feel safe. Even the couple's cavorting in their birthdays suits -- there had been two other instances -- didn't shock her anymore. In fact, she had noticed that they seemed to have a lot of fun in the bathtub.

"Maybe tonight Marilyn'll tell you if the baby's a boy or girl." Ruth's eyes popped wide as she stopped dancing to ponder the possibility.

"How can she do that?" Edna dried her hands on a dish rag, waiting to hear whether the forecast would involved medicine or magic.

"By holding a crystal over your belly and seeing how it moves." Ruth demonstrated with her hands. "A circle means a girl. Back and forth, a boy."

Edna smiled at the old woman's excitement, and sensing that she wanted to discuss the baby business for a bit, she leaned against the sink.

"She's only been wrong once. Actually, half wrong. Said Muriel Harper was going to have a girl, but she had twins, one of each." Ruth clapped her hands, then rubbed them together. "We're going to have some fun tonight."

The Dreamwaters were dressed when the women arrived. Edna thought Hank looked ruggedly handsome in his chinos and flannel shirt and Marilyn, like an Indian goddess, in her serape skirt.

They sat down to a table set with green beans, a roast garnished with onions and carrots, and what looked to be fried yams. Edna, feeling not the least bit squeamish,

looked forward to the feast; she was the hungriest that she had been in months. It wasn't until she was on her second helping that she found out that the meat was from an antelope shot by Hank, the yellow chunks were yucca yanked from the yard. She was surprised by this news but didn't hesitate to clean her plate before spooning up a bowl of cobbler.

After dinner, as she and Marilyn cleared the table, Hank carried a coffee table from the living room so he and Ruth had room to dance. In between trips to the kitchen, Edna caught glimpses of the two, paired like Mutt and Jeff. She noticed how smooth the reverend moved although Ruth jerked and dipped him this way and that.

Dishes done, she and Marilyn settled on the couch to watch the show.

"Reverend," Ruth said as Hank changed the record on the player, "with all of that monkeying around that you and Marilyn do . . ." The old woman paused, tried to press a curl from her lips. "I'd thought you'd have better rhythm."

Ruth cackled, Hank shrugged and Marilyn shook her head. Edna tried to figure what the joke was. By the time she had put two and two together, felt embarrassed, then amused at the old woman's brashness, the dancing had resumed. Ruth, straining upwards on her tip-toes, rested her head on the preacher's chest. She had a dreamy look in her eyes, as though she had moved to another time, another man, and Edna wondered if Ruth had roped a cowboy or two since her husband had died twenty years earlier. She hoped so; Ruth didn't belong alone. This thought -- a widow up to hanky-panky -- hit Edna, and she wondered what had happened to her morals.

The music stopped, but Ruth didn't move her head. Hank looked at the other two women for clues as to what to do. Finally, he whispered her name.

"Ruth?" He whispered again. "Ruth? Are you still alive?"

The old woman pulled back and swatted him on the arm. Hank lurched away, grinning; Ruth leaned toward him, wagging her finger.

"It'd take more than you to stop my heart." With that, she offered him up to the others.

Marilyn nudged Edna. "Go on. You dance."

Knowing that Ruth would shout down any protest, Edna accepted Hank's hand and let him lead her to "Come Rain or Come Shine." She faltered at first -- it had been many years since she had danced -- but she soon sensed the rhythm and relaxed as the reverend guided her. His large firm palm, placed on her back, reminded her of the first time she danced with Cooley.

It had been during the Sweethearts Dance in the high school gymnasium. She was fourteen, new to the school; Cooley, seventeen, was captain of the football team. He led her from the bleachers to the floor while "Who's Sorry Now" played. She remembered how safe she felt, with his strong hand on her back, her head on his chest, and how, as they bobbed in circles, lost, song after song, she decided that he was boy that she would marry.

"Edna." Ruth called. "You're right good company when you let your hair down. You should try it more often."

Edna stumbled. Not so long ago, she would have taken offense at such a remark, but tonight she considered the source and took it to be high praise. As Hank slowly wheeled her around, Edna flashed a smile to where the old woman sat, her knees parted so she could see clear up Monday.

Something about the evening made Edna feel daring, a bit carefree. She began to sing over the music: "Teacher, teacher, I declare. I see. . ." Before she finished the song, Ruth slammed her knees together, pulled her dress down, and crossed her arms. Edna detected a slight pinkening on Ruth's face as she worked her mouth, warming it up to speak.

"Lord." Ruth rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "I done created a monster."

An hour later, after Hank danced a rumba, a tango and a mambo with his wife -- they were so smooth that they could have been in the movies -- Hank dropped to the couch. He nodded to Marilyn and patted the space next to him.

"You women, have tuckered me out."

Ruth snorted.

"You're lucky I'm feeling a little lazy tonight," she said, "or you'd never be able to keep up with me." Ruth had dozed during the last couple of songs but the rest seemed to have revived her.

"Marilyn." Her toes tapped the floor. She rolled forward. "Let's see what the baby's going to be."

The idea made Edna smile; she wasn't ready for the evening to end. She couldn't recall ever having so much fun, feeling so relaxed, and she tried to pinpoint the source of her pleasure.

"Well?" Marilyn asked.

"Fine by me." Edna waited for her to lead the way, glad to return to the small room that had seemed ready to cave in just days before.

Ruth and Marilyn hovered above her as she lay on the single bed, her blouse pulled up, her belly exposed. Hank leaned against the door jamb of the bedroom, close enough to hear the women talk but far enough to respect Edna's modesty. Ruth giggled, suggested taking bets on the baby's sex while Marilyn removed a crystal wrapped with string from a small silk bag.

"Ready?"

Edna grinned, nodded.

The room was silent. Everyone held their breaths as Marilyn dangled the crystal above Edna's belly. They waited, watched for it to move. It didn't budge a bit.

"Marilyn, what's wrong with this thing?" Ruth grabbed the crystal, pulling the string from the doctor's fingers. She turned the rock over and over. "Why isn't it working?" She held the piece of quartz up to the light and squinted, as though she expected to discover some defect.

Marilyn folded her arms, bit her lower lip. "I'm not sure. I've never seen this happen." She took the crystal just as Ruth started to swing it back and forth in front of her face. "Maybe the spirit isn't strong enough to flow from the body."

Edna pulled down her blouse, zipped up her skirt, started to roll herself from the bed, then stopped. "Spirit? Whose do you mean? Mine or the baby's?"

Marilyn rubbed the stone with her thumb and index finger as though she was trying to warm it up. She smiled at Edna, who still lay on the bed, waiting for an answer.

"Let me try once more."

Edna was quiet on the way home. She conjured up the way the crystal had swung back and forth over her belly. A boy. She'd never been around little boys, never thought about having one. All she knew was they liked to eat dirt and play with bugs. Edna shivered. She had pictured a little girl, Noreen, neat and petite with ribbons in her hair, someone she could teach to cook and clean. What in the world would she do? Part of her knew that a piece of glass or rock couldn't tell a woman what kind of baby she was going to have, but it had been right so many times. And that business about spirit. What did Marilyn mean? Was something was wrong with her, with the baby?

When Edna had lay down on the bed at the Dreamwaters', she had thought of the dangling crystal as something fun, like reading tea leaves, but now she wasn't so sure.

On Tuesday morning, Hank Dreamwater stopped by Cowgirl Ruth's Diner and Motor Court to wish Edna well. His farewell was quick -- he was on his way to visit the sick members of his congregation -- but he left Edna with one piece of advice: "Don't

take any wooden nickels." She laughed at the time, but later, as she packed, she searched the line for a secret meaning.

Edna had learned a lot about dressing for travel during her trip from Virginia to Oklahoma. She changed from the gingham to a simple shirtwaist with insets at the seams. She filled the pockets with instruments of defense -- a pair of scissors, a pencil, a white handkerchief and a knife. Better to be prepared than sorry, she told herself. She left her head and legs bare so they could be cooled by circulating air, and she wore espadrilles that she could slip from her feet. The idea of driving with her toes curled around the gas pedal made her feel daring.

She had just latched the catch on the last piece of luggage when Ruth and Marilyn showed up to see her off. Without talk, they walked, one woman on each side of Edna, helping so the pieces of luggage didn't pound her legs, and she thought how funny they must look, the three united by the handles.

Ruth and Marilyn stood to the side of the car while Edna shoved the suitcases into the back seat. The door shut, she turned to say her good-bys. She was surprised by how sad she felt, as though she was leaving her best friends. She tried to corral her emotions by reminding herself that she had only known these people a few weeks.

Marilyn held her palm out. On it lay a rock with bands of black and gold. Edna recognized it from the Dreamwaters' book case.

"It's a worry stone." Marilyn dropped the rock into Edna's hand. "When something's wrong, rub it. You'll feel better."

Edna stroked the smooth stone and felt it warm to her touch. Moved by the gift, she wrapped her arms around Marilyn. A tear slipped from her eye; she brushed it onto her friend's shoulder.

"You're going to make a wonderful mother," the Indian woman said, hugging her back, "wherever you go." Edna, struggling to breathe silently through her stopped up nose, recognized that her words were true -- she would make a good mother no matter

what the baby turned out to be -- but she puzzled over what Marilyn meant by "wherever you go." Then, she realized that she had never told either woman of her plans, her past, and she wondered why, if there was something deficient about her. She thought of all the things that she had kept from Florence, her mother and Cooley. The she pictured herself curled up in a big box while everyone else stood outside calling her name. It was a lonely sight.

She made herself draw back from Marilyn, then turn to look at Ruth, whose her bottom lip poked out like someone who wasn't getting her way.

"I'm going to California," Edna said.

The two women stared at her, as though they were waiting for her to say more.

"I'll write a long letter once I get settled. Tell you all about everything."

Marilyn nodded. Ruth held out a brown bag.

"Here's some food for the road. A couple of chicks on white, no grass, just the way you like it. Some M&Ms. A thermos of suds." Ruth folded her arms and concentrated on grinding the toe of her boot into the ground, loosening the dirt, stirring up clouds of dust. "Hate to see you go." She lifted her head. Tears ran down her cheeks and into the wrinkles that framed her mouth. "Kind of got used to having you around, once you stopped throwing up all over my diner."

Edna looked her straight in the eyes and opened her arms. The old woman fell into them and squeezed her tight, as if she didn't want to let go, and the gesture reminded Edna of her mother. Her heart hurt.

She pulled away, still holding Ruth's bony wrists, and and tried to thank her. She wanted to say more but she was afraid that any more talk would uncork the sobbing inside of her. She hated the way some people got all wrought up in public. Some things were best kept private, and sadness was one of them. She slid onto the driver's side and tugged the door shut.

Ruth, sniffing, leaned into the window. "You know you're always welcome here."

Edna nodded, started the engine. A tear dripped from the tip of her nose to her lips. She backed out of the lot and pulled onto Route 66, and for the first few miles, she wondered, her sight blurred by crying, if she was headed the right way.

Chapter 4. San Diego

A week later, Edna sped south from Los Angeles toward San Diego, staying five miles under the speed limit. With her shoulders hunched, her head forward, she pretended that she was a race car driver as she negotiated hairpin turns again and again, up and down the rises by the ocean. The salt in the morning air had revived her spirits, and she realized that although she had lived along the Atlantic for more than twenty-five years, she couldn't recall its smell at all. Maybe it didn't have any. The next time she called Florence, she'd ask her to stick her head out the door and take a whiff.

Twenty miles outside San Diego, the land began to level off, and the needle on the gas gauge dropped below a quarter of a tank. Edna didn't stop; she had enough gas to get there. She started singing "Mairzy Doats," filling in her own silly rhymes for words that she couldn't remember, and she kept the song rolling along until she pulled into town.

San Diego looked just like the pictures on her postcards. Pretty and clean. The sun beaming. Flowers blooming everywhere. She drove slowly, noting the locations of stores, banks and the post office. She circled through town three times, then swung the car west to search for a cheap but clean room close to the ocean. After a slow sweep along the beach, the car sputtered to a stop in front of the Sea Breeze, a small white stucco motel with coral shutters, lavender doors, and pink hibiscus growing out front. Edna loved its fresh-scrubbed look, and she admired the way the flower beds had been tended. She didn't see a weed anywhere. She took running out of gas at the Sea Breeze Motel as a sign that life in California would go well.

The door to the lobby was open. From the sidewalk, she could see a woman with copper skin doing paperwork at a counter, its front decorated with starfish caught in a fishing net. It was a simple but attractive touch, and Edna thought maybe she could do something like it in her boarding house. The sailor boys would like it. She stepped through the doorway to register, and by the time she came out, Edna carried a newspaper under her arm, some postcards in her purse, and the key to room seven in her hand. She clutched the last tightly. It felt like a good luck charm.

Late that afternoon, Edna placed her purchases and a towel in a straw bag and strolled down the wood ramp to the beach. She placed her towel safe from sea spray and kids with shovels, then seated herself on top so only her feet touched the sand. She felt a little silly sitting there in a shirtwaist while everyone else wore trunks or tanks with sailor-boy legs. She hadn't owned a swim suit since she was a teenager spending summer days with Cooley at Ocean View Beach. As an adult, or maybe it was just before she married, Edna had become more modest, unwilling to strut around half-naked in front of God and anyone else who wanted a peek. Now, as she watched mothers tend to their babies at the water's edge -- she and her baby would join them next summer -- she wondered why she had been so fussy. She shook her head. On her pad of paper titled "Things to do," Edna wrote: "Buy bathing suit."

She scratched short notes on postcards, enough lines to let everyone -- her mother, Florence, Ruth and the Dreamwaters -- know that she was safe and in San Diego. Then she unfolded the newspaper and turned to the classifieds. By the time the sun started to set, gilding the waves with gold, Edna had circled three ads for houses to let. She put away the paper and watched the sun sink, setting the sea ablaze with flames of orange and pink. It looked just like a picture postcard.

The next morning, after a breakfast of three eggs, two large glasses of juice, six strips of bacon and a half of a honeydew melon at the Sunflower Restaurant, a small diner a block from the motel, and after a man from the filling station had poured two gallons of gasoline from a red can into her car, Edna went house hunting.

The first place, whose owner had described it as "having unlimited possibilities" during a chat on the telephone, stood two stories and leaned like a brown Tower of Pisa. Edna knew at first glance that she wasn't interested but, since the owner had taken time to meet her, she felt obligated to take a look inside. The tour took an hour or more as the man with the bowling ball belly and a cigar stuck in his mouth pointed out its good points. All Edna could see were dead bugs, feet up, on the floor, cracked walls, and a wave in linoleum on the kitchen floor that made her seasick.

She wasted less time at her second stop. Soon as she let herself through the rusty gate, she saw that the yellow yard was too small for a swing set, a sand box, even a clothesline.

When she pulled up to the third rental, she rechecked the address to make sure she had found the right place. It looked perfect, just like the house in her head, a gleaming, white two-story place with hibiscus growing out front. Edna cautioned herself not to get too excited, that the find was too good to be true, but then she remembered the omens of good luck from the day before and decided that God was finally getting around to giving her just rewards.

A middle-aged woman sat, her fuschia-flowered skirt spread on the steps of the porch, waiting for her. She introduced herself as Mrs. Hairston, and Edna thought the name fit as she eyeballed her hurricane of hair that had endured one too many bleach jobs, one too many perms. The woman explained, her freckled hands flitting, that she had raised her five children in the house -- the youngest had moved out six months earlier -- that she could no longer live there without family. It was too big, she said. It made her feel lonely.

"And Mr. Hairston?" Edna surprised herself. She usually didn't pry into others' personal business, but something about the woman piqued her curiosity.

"God rest his soul." Mrs. Hairston signed a cross over her bony chest, then bowed her head and sighed. "He drowned fishing fifteen years ago, fell overboard during a storm." She shook her head, as if to clear away the memory of her husband, dead in the water. "It was hard on the kids, especially my oldest boy, not having a daddy, but I did my best." She raised her eyebrows, shrugged, then smiled. "They all turned out all right. Got good jobs. Four are married." She pulled pictures from her cardigan pocket. "I got a mess of grandkids. They visit me from time to time."

Edna looked at the photographs. None of the children, who shared their grandmother's birdlike slightness, was attractive, but Edna, sensing the woman's loneliness, her need to speak about her life, oohed and aahed anyway, calling them "precious," and other names that didn't quite fit. Mrs. Hairston beamed, and Edna admired the way she loved her grandchildren, ugliness and all. Then she thought about the baby inside of her. He could turn out less than perfect. She imagined him with Cooley's big belly, her mother's weak eyes, her sister's webbed toes, and she knew that she would love him no matter what. The realization astonished her.

She handed the snapshots to Mrs. Hairston, who tucked them into her pocket, then motioned for Edna to follow her into the front room.

"You go on. Look all you want," the woman said, kneeling over a box half-filled with family photographs and knick knacks. "I'll get back to my packing."

Edna nodded thanks, then wound her way to the stairs, thinking how sad it was to grow old alone. Her thoughts returned to the business at hand as she topped the stairs. She counted five bedrooms on the second floor. Four were full-size. The fifth was small with a dormer and built-in window seat. She sat on the bench and pictured the room painted blue. It would make a wonderful nursery. She stood up and looked out the

window. On the ground below was a sandbox, a swing set and a clothesline, and the yard was circled by a chain-link fence. Perfect, Edna thought.

She wandered into the bathroom. In addition to a commode, sink and cast-iron bathtub, all scrubbed white, it contained a cabinet vanity, big enough for her boarders to keep their personal items. She opened its door long enough to glimpse a shoebox of hair rollers.

Downstairs, Edna found another bathroom with just a toilet and wash basin. She couldn't believe she'd found two commodes in one house. She had thought only movie stars lived like that. An adjacent room held a washer and folding table. There was also a special closet for brooms and such. Edna thought she had died and gone to heaven. But what really excited her was the kitchen, a large homey room, recently renovated, with a refrigerator and stove colored avocado green.

Edna returned, breathless, to the living room where Mrs. Hairston was tucking cardboard flaps on a box.

"How much a month?"

The woman looked up, squinting like she was trying to remember. She pushed her lower lip over her upper and thought some more.

"How much can you pay?"

"Seventy-five dollars," said Edna, rummaging through her purse.

"You got a deal." Mrs. Hairston stuck out a hand. "I'll be moved in a week."

On the way back to the motel, Edna stopped by the post office to mail her cards, then by Henry's Hardware to buy a "Room to Let" sign. The store smelled of the grease and dirt ground into its concrete floor. The items on the shelves were jumbled -- door knobs in with the plumbing supplies and seeds next to the paints -- so she took her time strolling aisles clogged by rolls of chicken wire, bags of fertilizer, sacks of grass seed. After two passes through the store, she asked for help. The clerk, befuddled by the

request, checked a half dozen places before locating a sign stuck between pieces of plywood. While he rang up her sale, Edna wondered how the store managed to stay in business, and she thought about Godwin's and how Cooley, even with his faults, kept things were they were supposed to be.

"Are you Henry?"

The man nodded and handed her change from her dollar bill.

"Have you thought about tidying up the store a bit? Putting things where they belong so folks can find them?" Edna asked, dropping coins into small change purse. "You might sell more that way."

The man glared, then leaned across the counter as though he had something special to say to her. "Lady, have you thought about minding your own beeswax?"

Edna burned. She saw no cause for such rudeness toward a customer. Cooley would have never treated anyone like that. She was glad that the store was empty so no one heard Henry talk to her that way, and she hoped it stayed that way. It would serve him right.

Next, she went into Pritchard's Department Store and tried on bathing suits. After trying two size eights, she asked the clerk to bring her an assortment of size tens. While she waited in the changing room before a full-length mirror, she saw that her nipples had grown big and brown and the change bothered her. She hoped it was caused by the baby and not cancer. When the saleswoman returned with an armful of suits, Edna grabbed a black one -- she had read that it was a slenderizing color -- and bought it without taking it off the hanger or waiting for her receipt. She was in a hurry to get to a bookstore. She wanted to read up on the business of having a baby.

By the time Edna left room seven to watch the sunset at the beach, she had read enough of Miss Brown's Baby Book to know that she probably didn't have cancer, and her anxiety was replaced by self-consciousness. She looked like a zebra, the way her

calves were tan, her thighs so white. She thanked God that she wouldn't see anyone she knew.

For the first hour, while the light was still bright, Edna lay on her side, reading more about having babies. She didn't want to be scared out of her wits anymore; she wanted to know exactly what would happen. Then, she sat up and worked on her "To do" list, making a day-by-day schedule for the next week. She made a note to call Mrs. Hairston in the morning to see if she wanted to sell any of her furniture.

By the time she laid her tablet of paper aside to watch the waves, she felt organized. Everything was coming together just as she had planned. She was wishing that she had someone to tell it all to when a handsome, white-haired man walked toward her, carrying bottles of Coca-Cola and a paper sack. Although there was something familiar about him, one part of her feared the approach of the stranger. The other, however, was ready for a bit of conversation. She smiled. He nodded to her, said "Hello" in a friendly way, then passed her by. She felt let down. She lay back on the towel, then eased onto her belly. The pressure made her want to find a lady's room but she stayed put. She had to see where the man was going. She saw him drop beside a not-so-attractive woman on a blanket. Clearly, they knew each other. She watched the two of them talk, and she could tell by the way they smiled, the way she tossed her hair, the way he reached to touch it, that they were happy together, maybe even married. Edna pushed her sunglasses up to the bridge of her nose and studied the couple, wondering what had made them a pair. The woman stretched toward the man and kissed him, letting her hand caress the side of his face. Edna felt jealous, and as she tried to figure out why, her heart stopped. She realized the white-haired man looked just like Cooley, only thinner.

With the dull roar of the ocean and its cooling breeze sifting through the screens of room seven, it didn't take long for Edna to fall asleep in San Diego. She slept a deep,

dreamless sleep. The sleep of the dead, her mother would have called it. The first morning she had awakened, her face pocked with dots from the chenille spread, she had felt like spring, bursting with life, ready to conquer the world. On the second, however, she was tossed from the bed to the floor. She lay there shaking in a fine powder of plaster, feeling the earth rumble and roll in waves beneath her. An earthquake. She called for Cooley to help her, then remembered that he was three thousand miles away. She tried to think of what to do, what she had learned in school, and all she could remember was something about hurricanes and bathtubs. Edging by bits of broken glass from an overhead lamp, slivers from a fallen mirror, she crawled, crying, over the buckling floor to the bathroom. Inside, she shut its door and huddled in the tub, waiting for the world to end.

She sat on the cold enamel with her knees to her chest, her arms wrapped around her head. She couldn't distinguish minutes from seconds. She prayed aloud to drown out the sounds of destruction. She said the Lord's Prayer over and over without pause, until it became a litany without answers. Her head and her chest were drenched in the sweat of fear, and it wasn't until she felt beads of water trickling down her face that she realized her shaking had stopped. A calm flooded her, and she knew the end was near. Her mother cradled Baby Edna in her arms, rocking and singing her to sleep. "I love you," Mama whispered, her breath warm and sweet. The singing continued, and she dropped off to sleep. Then, Edna was in the schoolhouse on Blue Mountain, sitting in the second row from the back, coloring a picture of an angel with one crayon. Gold hair, gold wings, gold halo. A beautiful angel. Someday, she'd be one. Go live in heaven and pluck a banana off a tree whenever she wanted. Fly high over the earth, strumming a harp, letting its notes float like leaves to the ground. The air cooled, smelled fresh. It was fall, and she was fifteen. She stood with Cooley under the pecan tree, bare except for a few orange leaves, at his Pawpaw's farm. He touched her hair, and she shimmered inside, feeling weak-kneed and warm. He placed his lips on hers; she closed her eyes.

Colors -- blues, golds, purples and reds -- swirled. She twitched. She rubbed her thighs together as she responded to the kiss, flicking her tongue against his, aching to swallow him up so he'd never leave her. The colors before her eyes washed white, and when Edna opened them, she saw the tunnel of light opening up before her.

It was past dawn when Edna came to, and all was still except for the sound of the ocean slapping the shore. She was alive. She rubbed her belly, as if to let her son know that all was well, then stretched back in the tub to make sure that whatever had happened had passed, and while she waited, she remembered some psychic, or maybe a scientist, saying that one day the whole state of California would drop off into the ocean. She tried to imagine it and saw the land cracking, parting, falling away from the mainland; millions of people sliding into the sea, their arms stretched toward heaven; their heads bobbing, their arms flailing, pulling each other under as they tried to save themselves.

She recalled a phrase of her mother's: "Once, shame on you; twice, shame on me." She had had her first brush with death. She wasn't about to wait around for another. She staggered out of the bathroom and began to pack. She was going back to where the land was firm under her feet.

On her way out of town, Edna saw that stores and offices were open as usual and that the parking lot at Henry's Hardware was full. She decided to stop at the post office to take care of a piece of unfinished business, and as she stood and wrote, she listened to the clerks talk about the tremors, joke about the "big one." Ha, ha, yourself, you fool, she thought. She spit on a stamp, pounded it onto an envelope, then posted the note she had written:

"Dear Mrs. Hairston,
Sorry, I can't let your house.
I have to go back home.
I'm going to have a baby.
Sincerely,

Edna Mae Godwin

P.S. You got some beautiful grandchildren. I bet they love you a lot.

P.P.S. Here's one month's rent for your trouble."

She felt a little bad about lying, but most of what she wrote was true.

Chapter 5. Oklahoma, Again

By the time Edna pulled into Sapulpa a week later, singing "Oklahoma," the white flecks of plaster were finally washed from her hair, and she thought she looked pretty good for a woman who had looked death square in the eye. Maybe the worry stone had helped.

It was mid-afternoon when she swung into the parking lot of Cowgirl Ruth's Motor Court and Diner, and she looked forward to seeing Ruth. And to eating. She was hungry enough to eat a cow. The bell clanged against the glass door as she went in, calling Ruth's attention to her. The old woman set down the coffee pot that she had been wiping and hurried to the door.

"Well, I'll be." She looked Edna up and down, as though she was trying to commit her to memory. "Just got over missing you, and here you are." She folded her arms around Edna and hugged the breath out of her. "Couldn't live without me, huh?"

Edna grinned, then pecked the old woman on the forehead, leaving a pink print of her puckered lips there. Shorty, the cook, waved from the kitchen.

"So, where've you been?" Ruth played tug-of-war with the washcloth and bobbed from one foot to the other. She seemed anxious for news.

"Thought I was going to the Garden of Eden, ended up in hell," Edna said, sliding into a booth for four. "I'll tell you about it while I eat. I'm starving" She slipped off her espadrilles and leaned her arms on the table top sticky with syrup. She took the washrag from Ruth and began wiping.

"I'll have the special." She folded the rag inside out and wiped some more. "No, make that two. And a couple of root beers."

By the time Edna started her story, the first omelet and fries were gone. She began working on the second plate, sopping up the red sauce with strips of egg. Between chews, she told Ruth about all that had transpired during the past two weeks, sparing no details. As she described her cancer scare, she said the word "nipples" out loud for the first time in her life. She blushed and tried to act nonchalant by sticking a french fry in her mouth. She poured more ketchup on her plate and recalled the tremors, the visitations and the visions that made her leave California. She had no regrets, she said. She didn't want to spend her life worrying that she and her baby would fall into the ocean. Ruth listened hard, not interrupting at all, and Edna wondered who had taught the old woman patience while she was gone.

She backtracked to her past, talking about Blue Mountain, the move to Tidewater with her family, and life with Cooley. She had started to tell Ruth about the incidents that had sent her on the road but the supper rush began.

Ruth got up and started clearing the table. "We'll talk more later. At my place."

Edna nodded.

By the time Ruth hung the "Closed" sign on the diner, Edna's feet hurt. Her ankles were swollen. She had pitched in to help, promising not to throw up, but she had not anticipated what three hours of walking a concrete floor would do to her, now that she was almost four months pregnant. She hobbled behind Ruth down the walk, thankful that the air had cooled. A big drop of rain smacked her on the forehead.

"You're carrying fluid," Ruth said as she unlocked the door to room number one. The coziness of the place surprised Edna, who had decided that all motel rooms had three pieces of cheap furniture, one picture on the wall, and an emptiness that would never leave no matter how long someone stayed. Ruth, however, had made her two adjoining rooms into a real home with photographs, knick-knacks and furniture that almost matched.

Edna plopped onto a settee covered with a cabbage-rose throw and slipped her shoes off. Her feet were fat and purple; her toes looked like little sausages. She rubbed and poked her ankles until she felt bone and she wondered if her legs would ever taper again or if they would look like tree trunks for the rest of her life.

"Put your feet up," Ruth ordered as she took two glasses and a bottle from a cabinet. "That'll make the swelling go down."

Edna, grateful, did as she was told. With her feet propped upon the coffee table, her head resting on the back of the settee, her eyes closed, Edna relaxed. She was too weary to worry about anything. The events of the past few months had finally caught up with her. She heard Ruth patter into the sitting area and opened her eyes. The old woman handed her a glass. She took it, sipped and spit, spraying the top of her shirtwaist.

"What is this?" Edna wiped her chin.

"Whiskey."

"You know I don't drink."

"And you don't play cards or get pregnant either. Consider it another first." Ruth settled into an easy chair in front of her. "Now, spill your guts. I'm all ears."

Edna took a small sip of the whiskey, drew it in between her teeth. It burned her throat, warmed her belly. She wasn't sure if she liked it or not. She took another sip. Third sip's the charm, she thought. It was starting to taste pretty good.

She cradled the glass between her palms and began to tell Ruth how things were between her and Cooley when she left. For the first time, she said Missy Hawkins' name out loud and described the things that Cooley had tried to do. She felt a little silly telling her about the day he tried to crawl into the bath with her, especially after spending time with the Dreamwaters, but she decided not to hold back. She wanted to tell everything to Ruth, who listened closely and remained quiet, except for an occasional "Un-huh." Edna talked and talked and talked until she caught Ruth up to the part where she walked

into the diner. Then she shut up and swigged the rest of her whiskey. She waited for the old woman to say something. Ruth shifted in her chair and stared at the glass in her lap. Finally, she spoke.

"You want to know what I think?"

Edna nodded, reached forward to set her glass on the table.

"I think you got Cooley mixed up with those men on Blue Mountain. Don't sound like to me he's ever done anything to hurt you." Ruth shook the shrunken cubes in her drink and looked at Edna. "Sounds like he loves you." She pushed herself up from the chair and reached for the empty glass on the table. "And maybe that's what you're afraid of."

The pronouncement made Edna feel sick to her stomach. As she listened to the sound of ice cubes clinking against glass, she thought about what Ruth had said. Her stomach knotted and unknotted; her fingers twitched. She tried to divorce her feelings from Cooley's actions, tried to think of times when he meant to harm her, to shame her, but, in truth, she couldn't come up with one that she was sure of.

Ruth continued from across the room. "Most likely, Cooley went to that Missy woman for a bit of companionship. That might not be right, but I'm not so sure it's wrong either."

Edna felt ashamed. Her mother had warned her and her sister many times: "If you don't give a man the loving he needs at home, he'll find it elsewhere." She moved her feet from the coffee table and drew her legs to her side on the couch. She had pulled away from Cooley many times, often before he reached for her, before he tried to break through the hollow part of her heart. The chamber that she had sealed so she wouldn't feel too much love or hate. Extreme passion scared her, and she didn't know why. It didn't make any sense.

Ruth returned with the drinks and parked herself on the couch next to Edna. The old woman looked serious, even a little sad, as she sat, sagging, on the edge of the settee, Edna slid her feet back onto the table and waited for her to speak.

"No picture of my husband in this house." Ruth squinted at Edna. "You know why?" She didn't wait for an answer. "Cause he's dead," she said, pointing to her heart and head, "here and here.

"For 20 years, Jeb drank, ran around and beat me. Blackened my eyes, broke bones, hurt me so bad that I lost my baby. He'd swear he was sorry, that he loved me, then he'd go right out the door to some woman or another he'd met hauling timber from Tulsa." Ruth turned the glass in her hand. "After a while, I was glad to see him go. Couldn't hit me then." She slid back against the cushion and put her feet on the table. "One day he went out, and that was it. He never came home again." She sipped a bit of her whiskey. "And I didn't go looking for him. Was too afraid I might find him."

Edna, not knowing what to say, took the old woman's hand. She wished that she could undo all the bad that had happened to Ruth, fix it so she could live her life over again, but she knew it was foolish thinking. The past was the past. Then she thought about Cooley and how he would probably kill any man who hit a woman, especially a pregnant one. She put her arm around Ruth, her head on her shoulder. Together, they sat in silence until the sky started to lighten.

At some point, Edna had fallen asleep. She couldn't remember exactly when, but she recalled Ruth moving, covering her with a spread. She dreamed of Cooley. He wore a white hat on his head, a holster on his hips, and he rode a pinto across the plain, in and out of houses, diners and motor courts, looking for Jeb, wanting to hunt him down and shoot him dead. He was riding hard when Ruth shook her shoulder, saying it was time for church. Edna heard her mumbling something about Marilyn, about love-something.

What was it? Love canters? Edna couldn't make her mind fit around love and horses. She was too tired.

At eleven, wearing the clothes that she'd slept in, Edna straggled into the sanctuary behind Ruth. In South Norfolk, Edna had always sat towards the back, far from the eyes of the preacher, but at Bethel Baptist in Sapulpa, Ruth pulled her to the front. They plunked down on the pew where Marilyn Dreamwater sat, eyes wide as though she had just witnessed a miracle. They were so close to Hank that Edna could see the comb lines left in his hair. For the first time, she noticed that he was handsome in a rugged kind of way.

While he led a prayer in a voice loud enough to drown out the squeaking of folding chairs, Edna looked over her shoulder. She was surprised to see the small, cinder block church full of Indians and whites. Like blue jays and blackbirds, the two usually didn't mix -- the Dreamwaters and Ruth were an exception -- but at Bethel Baptist, both colors, plus a couple of Chinese, shared the pews. Men with brims of their hats squeezed between their fingers; young mothers cooling children on their laps with paper fans advertising a funeral home in Tulsa; old folks with their ears angled toward the altar. Their clothing was as plain as the sanctuary, just the bare essentials with no signs of adornment. Edna judged it to be a poor congregation, and she noted later that the offering plate held more copper than silver when it passed down her row.

Hank asked the congregation to open their Bibles to First Corinthians. Edna listened to pages whisper. She felt embarrassed that she had not thought to pack her Bible. It had never entered her mind.

Hank began reading the scripture, and as his strong voice echoed, her mouth moved with his. She knew the verses by heart, had learned them when she was twelve and a new member of the Girls' Auxiliary, a group that met weekly at South Norfolk Baptist to study scriptures and to learn how missionaries spread God's Word in foreign

lands. She had been asked to present a lesson on Mexico, where Christians backed by the Lottie Moon Missionary Fund worked to convert Catholics and Indians. Her mother had helped her put together a costume, a sombrero borrowed from a neighbor and a serape made from an old towel that her mother had cut and striped green, white and red. She had worn the two with her white Easter dress and patent leather shoes, and everyone, including her mother and the G.A. leader, had made over her, saying how much she looked like a real Mexican.

Hank read on: "And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

It was her favorite line from the Bible, one of more than 25 verses that she had memorized to become a lady-in-waiting, the first step of the auxiliary monarchy. She silently repeated the scripture to herself, then examined its meaning. She had faith. She had faith that she could do anything she set her mind to. And she must have hope, or else she'd be in San Diego rather than Sapulpa. Love? She traced the lines on the palms of her hand, searching for an answer. It was a tricky question. Was it something you felt so deeply inside that it made your heart want to burst? Or was it all in your head, like an idea? Jeb had sworn that he loved Ruth, yet all he did was hurt her. Words didn't mean a thing, she guessed.

Edna reflected on her reasons for marrying Cooley almost twenty years before. He was handsome, popular, voted "Best all around" in high school. He came from an old Virginia family, one that knew who was who and that included a senator or two on its family tree. No one laughed at a Godwin. It was a name that held water with folks. The main reason that she had married him, however, was that he made her feel safe. Not that he had been called on to save her life or anything. It was the small things he did. Like guiding her firmly but gently on the dance floor, helping her out of a car, laying his jacket on her shoulders to ward off a chill. On her wedding day, she had had no doubts about Cooley at all. She loved him; he loved her.

Edna tried to see the path that had twisted their love into something she couldn't quite name, but there were so many turns during the years that she became lost. She strained to remember the intricacies of their relationship, but the dull pounding in her head made it hard to think. All she knew for sure was Cooley wasn't like those men on Blue Mountain, the ones who leered at her behind her mother's back, and he wasn't any angel. Then, again, neither was she. Edna tried to imagine the expression on Cooley's face when she told him that she had gotten drunk off whiskey. She laughed aloud, then caught herself as she felt Ruth shoot her a look.

She rose with the congregation to sing "This Little Light of Mine," a hymn that she had learned as a child. They sang a cappella, the way they had the other songs in the service, but this time the low thump of drums and the brassy shakes of tambourines accented the beat as the hymn poured from their souls. The music made Edna feel light, as if she could fly, and she left the sanctuary glowing. It was time to go home.

Outside the church, after its members had dwindled from the door one by one, Edna announced her plans. Ruth and the Dreamwaters, however, wouldn't hear of Edna leaving without a hot Sunday dinner. "Besides," Ruth pleaded, "Marilyn's got to do a love incantation for you."

"A what?" Edna recalled Ruth mumbling that morning. She had attributed the nonsense to the liquor from the night before. It had pickled the poor woman's brain.

"A love incantation. An Indian love song. To make sure things turn out good for you and Cooley." Ruth stuck her hands on her hips and waited to swat down any protests. Edna sighed and circled her arm through the loop of the old woman's.

"Whatever you say, Ruth. I need all the help I can get."

After a dinner of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans and apple pie and an explanation from Ruth about Edna's situation, Marilyn shooed her guests from the table.

"The dishes aren't going anywhere. They'll wait, " she said, untying the apron from her waist. "Go get comfortable on the porch. Hank, how about running some water in the tub?" She headed toward the room that held her medical supplies. "I'll be back in a minute."

Ruth and Edna settled into rocking chairs that looked out over the flat land. As they rocked, Edna wondered if Hank and Marilyn were going to take a bath. Although she was no longer shocked by their outdoor bathing, she wasn't sure she wanted to watch them monkeying around so soon after dinner. Especially on a Sunday.

Edna, a bit drowsy from the heavy meal, rested her head against the slats of the chair and listened to Hank and Ruth banter over the sound of running water. The squeak of the screen door opening roused her. Through it came Marilyn, dressed in beaded buckskins, wearing feathers in her hair. She looked as if she belonged in the movies.

Marilyn shook a rattle, painted red and white, at Hank and Ruth, and told them to go inside so Edna could have a little privacy. Ruth balked. She wanted to stay. After all, she said, it had been her idea. Marilyn was firm in insistence, and Ruth finally relented, dragging her feet and whining as she followed Hank into the house.

Edna's curiosity was piqued. She couldn't imagine what was so private that Ruth had to be sent away. She stood up and faced the Indian woman.

"Are you ready?" Marilyn asked.

"As much as I'll ever be."

Marilyn explained that the song she would sing would make Edna so wildly attracted to her husband again, and him to her, that she would want to go home as soon as possible. She would sing the song four times, then Edna would immerse herself in the tub in order to remake her soul. The plan sounded simple enough to Edna.

"So, go on and take off your clothes," Marilyn said, turning her back. "You can lay them on the railing."

"I've got to get naked? Can't I leave on my undergarments?"

"No. You've got to take off everything. It's part of the ceremony."

She thought of what the Indians in the movies did, how they sat around in teepees. "Couldn't I just smoke a peace pipe?"

"That's for other ceremonies. You have to go into the water for this one."

Edna decided that she would have to trust Marilyn. She turned away and started unbuttoning her dress. She looked around as she pulled her blouse from her shoulder. She wanted to make sure that no one was peeking.

When she was done, Edna turned around. She tried to look natural as she dangled her hands in front of herself, her upper arms shielding her breasts. She didn't want Marilyn to know how much her nakedness embarrassed her. She shook her hair from her face, breathed deeply, and said, "I'm ready."

Marilyn faced her and smiled. "Everything is okay. Just relax. No one here but you, me and the spirits." She helped Edna into the tub and told her to remain standing. Then she stood back, closed her eyes, and shook her rattle seven times. She chanted what sounded like gibberish, punctuating lines with cries of "Ha!" and danced, throwing her hair up and down, kicking up her feet like there was no tomorrow. Edna stared at the concentration on her friend's face. She felt the hairs on her arms rise, the tips of her fingers pulse. The sounds of the rattle, the song, and moccasins dusting the wood floor aroused her, making her body want to stretch and arc. Her shame disappeared; her hands fell to her side. Edna stood tall, her head and shoulders back.

The chanting stopped. Marilyn opened her eyes and nodded that it was time for the immersion. Edna dropped to the tub, bent her legs into a pretzel, and held her breath. She slid under the water until the air emptied from her chest. Then, she popped up laughing, splashing. "I'm ready to roll," she said, and she knew from the sound of her

own voice, from the way her heart felt open, ready to be filled, that it was true. She couldn't wait to get home to Cooley.

With goodbyes said and a promise from Ruth that she would act as an honorary grandmother for Earl Cooley Godwin III, Edna rumbled down the dirt drive to pick up Route 66. Before she turned onto the highway, she stopped to read the crumpled up piece of paper that Marilyn had given her:

Ha! Your bodies will be filled with love.
Your spirits will soar with the birds.
Ha! Your souls will become one forever
as you walk the Eternal White Road.

Souls will become one forever. She liked that. Edna reread the song several times, trying to commit it to memory. After a few minutes, she folded the sheet of paper into quarters, tucked it inside her bra. She stepped on the gas. "Ha!"

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Chapter 6. Come Rain or Come Shine

It was the first Sunday in August, time to dig up part of the summer garden and to plant collards and mustard salad. Cooley, dressed in khakis with a pair of suspenders over his loose t-shirt, stood with his hoe in hand and looked at the pole beans dried on their vines. His heart ached at the waste. Other summers, Edna had canned as many as twenty quarts. These she cooked with slabs of salt pork. Tomatoes, splotched deep red and black, lay burst on the ground. He thought about the spicy sauce that Edna put up each year. He wasn't much on foreign foods, but he loved her spaghetti. At the back of the garden, strawberry plants splayed against the ground. Cooley realized he hadn't had one bite of cobbler all summer.

He had thought twice about doing the fall planting since Edna was gone. Then he decided that he could always give the greens to someone who might invite him over for a home-cooked meal. He was tired of eating at Bunny's Diner all the time. But at least it was better than Missy's.

He had enjoyed the cornbread broken up in buttermilk the first night he had stayed for dinner. Careful to repay Missy's kindness and hoping for some home cooking, he had shown up on subsequent visits with gifts. Sacks of pole beans, squash and tomatoes, green and red, from his garden. A nice roast with a few of those small white potatoes. Even an electric refrigerator. But these things -- and the money that he had left around her house -- did not inspire Missy to change her menu. She just kept serving up cornbread. Eventually, Cooley faced the sad truth: Missy didn't cook, and she had no intention of learning.

Now, her meals didn't matter at all to Cooley. He had stopped seeing her after the evening he fell out cold. He had been embarrassed that the doctor had seen him naked,

lying on her floor. Then Vera yelled at him a couple of days later, telling him it was just such shenanigans that had sent Edna to San Diego. The news threw Cooley for a loop. He felt bad that his affair had hurt Edna. It had never entered his mind that she might find out, and he had figured that seeing Missy would keep him from pestering his wife. What really got him, however, was that Edna had the gumption to go clear across the country on her own. She had either lost her mind, or he didn't know her as well as he thought. He wondered if she would ever come home again. If he would ever adjust to her being gone. Each morning he still awoke expecting to see Edna by his side but her still fluffed pillow reminded him that she was gone, maybe for good.

Cooley squatted to pull up the dead strawberry plants. As he tugged and tossed, tugged and tossed, he tried to recall what the evening's specials were at Bunny's. He remembered that one was country fried steak, and his mind flashed on how Edna used to fix hers so the crispy breading sealed in the beef juice just right. His belly gurgled with the memory.

Edna was trying to get home as quickly as possible, but everything seemed to conspire against her. A truck had jack-knifed right in front of her, before she ever got out of Oklahoma, holding up traffic for more than three hours; a thunderstorm in Illinois forced her to pull to the side of the road for awhile; and a rockslide in West Virginia caused a detour that took her more than a hundred miles out of the way. And then there were all those other stops along the way. It seemed that she either had to pee or eat all the time. If this kept up, she might have to ask Cooley to install a commode by the kitchen like at Mrs. Hairston's.

A few miles southeast of Charlottesville, Edna honked her horn to speed up the slowpoke in front of the Buick. Snaking through the hills, she tried to imagine what Cooley was doing. Maybe cleaning up the hardware store. She pictured him sweeping, his big arms moving in long, slow strokes, and the image set her heart to beating. She

wondered if he really missed her or if that was just her mother's talk, a way to try to con her into coming home. Her insides jittered as she considered the possibility that he was doing just fine without her.

Cooley counted the nickels in the register three times. Not once did he come up with the same amount. His mind kept wandering. A few hours earlier, Ben had told him that Missy was going to marry Fred Potter, an engineer with the railroad, and the news made Cooley feel lonely, perhaps even a little hurt. It had only been six or so weeks since he had last seen her, and she had already replaced him, just like a pair of old socks. His Pawpaw used to say "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," and he was right. He had never seen Missy mad until he had stopped by her house to break up. Rather than get into the business about how his cheating had hurt his wife, he had just told Missy that his heart couldn't take the excitement anymore.

"*Your* heart?" She had picked up a tomato from the kitchen counter, thrown it at him, and missed. "What about *my* heart?" She threw another, and although he tried to dodge it, the tomato splattered on his chest.

"Missy, calm down." He kept his distance from her as he watched her look for something else to throw. She picked up a yellow squash.

"Four years. Now Edna's gone, and you tell me it's over?" She took aim. Cooley crossed his arms in front of his face. "You son of a bitch." She pitched the squash and hit him in the groin.

Cooley yelped and grabbed himself. "Missy, listen to me."

"No, you listen to me, old man."

Old man? The name hurt. He wondered if she had always thought of him as old.

"You're a dog." Her nostrils flared. She stepped toward him, wagging her finger in his face, jabbing it back and forth as though she wanted to poke an eye out. "Always

sniffing around for sex, food." Missy stomped to the front door and pushed open the screen. "Get out. Enough is enough."

Cooley had left, hadn't returned. Her words had stung. He thought about what she had called him and wondered if it was true. Was he a dog? When he was ten, his Pawpaw had mated his setter, Ginger, with a stud. It was horrible how she had yelped and howled, trying to wrestle free from his forelegs. Cooley remembered how strange the two looked hooked together, butt to butt, panting, tongues dangling from their mouths. Once the two dogs became free of each other, the stud strutted to the food bucket while Ginger hid by the back steps and tended to herself, licking her wound. Cooley had felt so sorry for Ginger that he ached to go over and hold her. But she was scared, and he knew that it was best to let her be. In some ways, Edna reminded him of Ginger, the way she would pull away and go off by herself. Maybe Missy was right. Maybe he was a dog. Maybe he wasn't a fit husband for any woman, and the thought made him sad, ashamed.

Still, he didn't like being alone. It wasn't natural. Since the start of time, the world had been made of couples. And that's how Cooley saw life in South Norfolk. Everybody had someone but him. He woke up alone, ate dinner by himself, went home to an empty house. The cleaning woman, Isabel Freeman, worked from noon to five, Mondays and Thursdays, and he didn't mind going home so much on those days, even if she did leave a half hour later. But the evenings that he spent alone seemed to drag on forever. He often turned the radio on just for the sound of another voice.

The truth was Cooley missed Edna. Not just as a cook or someone to have his way with. He missed her presence. Sometimes when he worked in his garden and she hung out the wash, he would stop and just watch her, admire the way she glided along the line pinning up sheets, her face tilted toward the sky, her hair gleaming gold and red under the sun, her legs silhouetted through her cotton skirt. Those nights, when he slid beside her onto the clean sheets, their smell reminding him of Edna in the morning light,

his admiration for her turned to an aching so deep, so strong that he wanted to bury his head into her hair and cry.

Cooley leaned against the register and wondered. Was it wrong to want someone that much? He didn't know and realized that he might not ever find out.

He dumped a handful of nickels on the counter and started counting them a fourth time. He concentrated. This time he'd get it right.

The gas gauge read three-fourths of a tank. The Buick didn't need a fill-up but Edna was curious to find out what had happened to the pregnant woman at the Sunoco station. She drove out of her way in order to find out.

An old man waited on her without wasting words. He was too busy spitting and chewing. She wondered if he was the woman's father -- hoped it wasn't her husband -- and worked on phrasing her question so she didn't appear too nosey.

From her side window, Edna watched the old geezer hang up the gas nozzle and walk toward her. Stalling for time, she waited to pull out her two dollars until he reached her window.

"So, what happened to that nice woman who used to work here?" Edna asked, slowly sliding two ones from her wallet. "Did she ever have her baby?"

The old man squirted brown juice from his gums to the ground. "Yup."

Edna mustered up a pleasant smile. "Well, what'd she have? A boy or girl?"

The attendant chewed and thought hard. "Boy, I believe."

"That's wonderful. Is she going to stay home with the baby for a while?" Her smile strained tight across her teeth. The old geezer was wearing her patience.

"She done gave the baby away. I wouldn't let her keep it."

Edna felt her face freeze, her insides heave, and she realized that she had nothing else to say to the man. She was glad that he wasn't her husband. Cooley would never act

like that. She turned the key, put the car in drive and floored the gas, leaving a cloud of dust in the old man's face and hoping he would choke on it.

With a bottle of Dr. Pepper wedged between his thighs, Cooley sat on the front porch, listening to the steady hum of the vacuum cleaner. Even though he and Mrs. Freeman were separated by a wall, he felt comfort in knowing that another person was just on the other side.

He tore open a packet of peanuts and dumped them into his drink. The salt made the soda fizz. He took a sip. The carbonation tickled his tongue.

He had just called Jack Bond about buying one of his pointer pups, and he figured that in another week or so, he'd have one chewing at his toes. He looked forward to the company. He would take her to the store each day, brush her coat every evening, let her sleep at the foot of his bed each night. The dog might be a sorry replacement for Edna, but she was better than nothing, and he vowed to take better care of her than he did his wife.

Jack had said that all the pups were white with liver-colored spots, and Cooley had made up his mind to call his "Ginger," in memory of his Pawpaw's dog and, in a way, of Edna. He bit off the tip of a stogie and spit it into the yard.

The crunch of gravel got his attention as he tried to light his cigar. A Buick, like the one he had before Edna got it in her mind to go to California, rolled up the drive. He squinted his eyes to make out who was behind the wheel. The match burned his fingers, and he dropped it.

As soon as Edna turned into the drive, she saw Cooley swinging on the porch, the same spot where he sat when she left, and she wondered for a moment if he had bothered to move at all during the past few months. She parked in front of the house, noticed how nice it looked, and rested her hands on the steering wheel. She wanted to jump out and

rush into Cooley's arms, but she wasn't sure how he felt. She decided to wait to see if he would come to greet her. She stared through the smudges on the windshield.

Just as she detected some movement on his part, she saw the screen door open and a woman come out. Edna's heart dropped to her stomach as she watched them talk. Then it hit her. Her husband had moved someone else into their house. She rested her head on the steering wheel and cried.

Between the glare and grit on the windshield, Cooley couldn't make out who sat in the front seat of the car. One thing was for sure, whoever owned it didn't take much pride in keeping it clean. It was covered with dirt. He had started get up and see who it was when Mrs. Freeman came out for a minute to tell him that he was out of ammonia, that she'd need some by Thursday if he wanted a clean floor. He had never had to keep track of cleaning supplies until after Edna left. Now it seemed he had to go to the market every other night to pick up this and that.

Cooley set his Dr. Pepper on the porch and got up to see who was in the car. He hoped it wasn't that Fuller Brush salesman. Edna had always been one of his best customers, so he continued to stop by the house every week, to see if she had returned from her trip. Cooley had not known how to tell him that she was probably gone for good.

He heard the sobs of a woman before he reached the driver's windows, and a catch in between the spells of wailing, a sound like air stealing into a Mason jar once the seal had been broken, told him that it was Edna with her head on the steering wheel. Cooley stopped, confused, shaking from nervousness. Vera had told him that Edna had left for good, was making a new life in California, and he had pictured her living in a stucco house, happily scrubbing its tile floor. Now, here she was sitting in the drive, crying her eyes out, and Cooley wondered what he had done this time. He wanted to reach in and comfort her, but he didn't want her to push his arms away. She had done that too many times before.

He took a deep breath, tried to steady his shaking, and stepped to the window of the Buick.

"Edna."

Edna sniffled and lifted her head, not daring to look at Cooley. She rummaged through her pocketbook for a handkerchief to wipe her eyes, blow her nose. Her sorrow ran so deep that she felt as if a lump the size of a grapefruit had formed in her throat. She didn't trust herself to speak.

"Edna, you okay?"

She stared straight ahead. Tears trickled down her cheeks, into her mouth. She couldn't move. She tried to see her future but her mind went blank. She licked the salt from her lips.

When she heard feet crunching gravel, she knew it was that woman coming to see what the commotion was. She could feel Cooley turn to greet her. Jealousy chewed on Edna's heart.

"I'm done for the day." The voice twanged. "See you Thursday. Don't forget the ammonia."

Edna tried to make sense of the words, but everything in her head was scrambled. She heard the woman's footsteps fade toward the road, and she wondered where she was going. Cooley leaned into the window.

"I had to get a cleaning woman to come in while you were gone. Couldn't keep everything straight by myself."

She smelled cigar on Cooley's breath. She heard his words loud and clear, and as their meaning seeped into her brain, the tension that had numbed her fell away. She felt like a rag doll.

Cooley had seen his wife cry before, like the time she knocked a porcelain shoe off the china cabinet while dusting, but he had never seen her pour her heart out like this, like someone had died. He felt that he was intruding on her grief, pushing in on her

privacy and that he should let her weep in peace, but he couldn't leave her alone.

He waited for her to speak. Even a tongue lashing would be better than such sad silence. He was about to ask her to come up to the house when she turned to him, her face painted with dust and tears. The open rawness tore into him.

He opened the car door and put out his hand.

She let him lead her like a child up to the front porch. He guided her to the swing and motioned her to sit. He slid beside her, not close enough to touch his thigh to hers. They sat that way for a long time before he said, "I'll be back in a minute. You rest."

The porch door creaked and slammed. Edna stared at the worry stone in her hand. Her head hurt too much to think. She breathed deep and exhaled, trying to expel all the turmoil that had been pressing on her. She rubbed the worry stone until it felt like it was on fire.

A few minutes later, Cooley returned with a glass of ice water and a cool, damp rag. He handed her the glass; she took a few sips and noticed how good Cooley looked with his big belly gone.

"Feeling better?"

She nodded. Cooley sat down, his body cocked toward Edna. He took the washrag and stroked her face. The gentleness of the motions, the coolness of the rag, the tenderness of his attentions made her feel cared for. When he finished and her face felt fresh, she turned and said, "Thank you," then leaned over to kiss him.

The kiss bewildered Cooley. He couldn't remember the last time Edna had done such a thing. If she hadn't been so distraught earlier, he would have thought it was a trick. He pulled back and took a long look at his wife. She was different. She had filled out a bit, and the extra weight made her look less stiff, more earthy. Her hair wasn't curled up all tight; it was loose, flowing, the way hair was supposed to be, and her face was burnished copper by the sun and bare of make-up except for a trace of lipstick. What really surprised, though, were her bare legs. He wanted to drag his fingers from

her ankles to her thighs. He felt aroused for the first time since the doctor had put him on blood pressure pills. He shifted on the swing and looked away from his wife.

"Cooley."

He blushed and turned his gaze to her face. Her eyes seemed to search his.

"I've missed you."

He reached toward Edna, and she fell into his chest, crying and laughing. It sounded as though she was saying "Ha!" in between gasps. He held her and rocked her, stroked her hair, mumbling over and over, "I missed you, too," and he knew that he wanted nothing more than to hold her tight and never let her go.

As she nestled against her husband's chest, Edna felt a flutter, like the beating of wings. She felt as though something had swooped down to steal away their sorrows. She felt light, almost giddy, and she wondered why it had taken so many years to learn how to be happy, to feel such peace. She sighed.

Cooley relaxed his hold on her but Edna didn't move. She felt safe and comfortable where she was, as though their souls would be one forever. She listened to the beating of her husband's heart, wishing that she could make it strong again, thinking about the new one beating within her, the one her husband had helped to create.

She kissed him on the cheek, letting her lips linger. "I'm going to take a bath."

"Okay, sugar." Cooley removed his arms from her shoulders, afraid that his closeness had made her uneasy. "I'll get your bags."

"Cooley?" Edna rose and moved to the door. Her hand rested on its handle.

"Hm?" He smiled at her.

"Forget the bags."

She winked a swollen eye at him, then curled her finger.

"You come, too."